TURKEY

Attacks on higher education declined in 2020 but rose in 2021; over 500 students were arrested or detained for their involvement in education-related protests, many of which occurred at Boğaziçi University. Authorities detained dozens of school teachers during the period for accused links to “terrorist” organizations. In addition, several schools in southeast Turkey were used for military purposes and later attacked.

Context

Throughout the 2020-2021 reporting period, the Justice and Development (AKP) party, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, maintained its parliamentary majority in the country. During this time, authorities further consolidated power and targeted perceived opponents, according to Human Rights Watch. In some cases, Turkish authorities detained their perceived opponents, including members the Fethullah Gülen movement, sometimes through transnational renditions, according to Freedom House and the UN. As reported in Education under Attack 2020, the Turkish government accused Gülen, a US-based religious leader, of orchestrating a coup and designated his followers, including educators, as belonging to a “terrorist” organization.

In March 2021, the Turkish government withdrew from the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women And Domestic Violence, which protected women’s rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LBGT) rights, according to Human Rights Watch. Some higher education students demonstrated in defense of LGBT rights on campuses during the reporting period.

In southeast Turkey and Iraq, Turkish forces engaged in military operations, including airstrikes and drones, against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) during the reporting period, according to ACLED. In addition, Turkish forces continued to occupy areas of northern Syria, according to Rule of Law in Armed Conflicts project (RULAC). In 2020 and 2021, Turkey continued to host over 3.6 million Syrian refugees, according to the UN.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected education during the reporting period, with some Turkish primary and secondary schools experiencing over a year of closures. A UN 2020-2021 Back To School Survey for refugee parents found that only 51 percent of respondents had access to distance learning platforms during school closures. Furthermore, during the reporting period, 400,000 refugee children remained out of school. At the university level, Turkish authorities continued to dismiss, investigate, or suspend academics, according to Scholars at Risk, and appointed rectors, instead of following established democratic campus election procedures.

Attacks on Schools

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified three reported incidents of attacks on schools. This trend remained consistent with previous years. GCPEA identified at least two reported attacks on schools in southeast Turkey in 2019.

In 2020, GCPEA identified at least three reported incidents of attacks on schools from media sources that were quoting the statements non-state armed groups. Reports attributed the attacks, which occurred in Istanbul and Batman provinces, to non-state armed groups. Examples included:

- Media sources reported that on May 2, 2020, members of an armed group detonated a remote explosive device at a girls’ school dormitory in Esenyurt district, Istanbul. The dormitory, which sustained damages, was empty at the time of attack due to Covid-19 restrictions. A women’s branch of the Peoples’ United Revolutionary Movement militant group claimed the attack.

- On May 7, 2021, a militant group allegedly set fire to a private school dormitory in Gediz, Kütahya province. The attack damaged the building, which was not operational due to Covid-19 school closures.

- On August 6, 2020, an armed group allegedly set fire to a primary school in Bağlar neighborhood of Batman city. The attack damaged the building, according to media sources.
Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified three reported incidents of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel that affected 30 educators and students. By comparison, GCPEA did not identify any such attacks in 2019, and three in 2018. Attacks on school teachers typically involved the arrest or detention of teachers working at schools associated with the Gülen movement, or who were members of opposition groups.

In 2020, GCPEA identified one reported incident of an attack that affected 26 school teachers. On November 26, 2020, Turkish authorities allegedly detained 26 teachers, and searched their homes and classrooms, in Diyarbakır province. The teachers, who were members of the Education and Science Workers’ Union (Eğitim-Sen), were allegedly held on “terrorist” charges.

In 2021, GCPEA identified two further reports of attacks on school teachers and students:

- Human Rights Watch and media sources reported that on May 31, 2021, Turkish and Kyrgyz authorities abducted an educator of Turkish-Kyrgyz nationality who directed a network of Gülen schools in Kyrgyzstan, and subsequently extrajudicially transferred him to Turkey; on July 5, 2021, Erdoğan released video footage of the teacher in detention in Turkey and announced that Turkish intelligence services had brought him to Turkey.

- Local media reported that on November 6, 2021, police allegedly arrested three school students who were protesting against the Council of Higher Education in Uskudar, Istanbul. Similar protests involving higher education students are described below.

Military use of schools and universities

GCPEA identified at least seven cases of military use of schools during the 2020-2021 reporting period. This marked an increase as compared to previous years when GCPEA did not identify any such reports.

In 2020, GPCEA identified five reported cases of military use of schools from media sources quoting the statements of non-state armed groups. In the majority of cases, armed groups attacked Turkish police or security forces positioned at schools in Diyarbakır province in the southeast. Examples included:

- On January 15, 2020, a unit of special operations police officers were allegedly stationed inside a primary school in Baglar, Diyarbakır province. According to a statement to local media, members of an armed group attacked the police with improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

- On February 16, 2020, Turkish police forces were reportedly positioned in a primary school in Sur town, Diyarbakır province, when an armed group attacked them with three IEDs, according to a media source.

- Local media reported that on March 18, 2021, police were occupying the garden of a school in Bağlar town, Diyarbakır province, when an armed group attacked them with handmade explosives and small weapons. The attack allegedly killed or injured three police officers.

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least two reported incidents of military use of schools in southeast Turkey:

- On February 14, 2021, special operations police stationed in a school in Yibo, Silvan, Diyarbakır province, were reportedly attacked by an armed group with sound bombs, according to a media source. Police allegedly retaliated with gunfire.

- A media source reported that on March 6, 2021, an armed group attacked a police unit that had stationed in a school in the Pazayeri area of Batman city.

Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school or university

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified one report of sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school or university. In 2018 and 2019, GCPEA did not collect any reports documenting such attacks.

Human Rights Watch and media sources reported that on January 5, 2021, police raided the home of two transgender female students who had joined student protests at Boğaziçi University a day earlier. Following violent arrest by the police, one student reported that police officers threatened her with rape during her detention and also stayed in a hospital.
room during a mandatory medical exam. As described in the following section, LBGT students prominently participated in higher education protests in January and February 2021.

**Attacks on higher education**

In 2020 and 2021, GCPEA identified over 30 reports of attacks on higher education that led to the injury or arrest of approximately 600 university students and personnel. By comparison, GCPEA identified reports indicating that around 150 university personnel and students were detained in 2018, and over 50 university students or personnel had been detained in 2019.

In 2020, GCPEA identified seven incidents of attacks on higher education students and one incident of an attack on a university building. The majority of these incidents involved the excessive use of force by police against student protesters, and led to the arrest or detention of nearly 80 students:

- Scholars at Risk and media sources reported that on January 2, 2020, university students peacefully protested against a new university policy reducing the number of subsidized student meals in front of an administrative building at Istanbul University, Fatih district, Istanbul. While some reports note that students followed police orders, police allegedly used batons and physical violence to disperse the protest.
- Local media sources reported that on March 4, 2020, students demonstrated against difficult living conditions for students, and to demand student loan forgiveness. Police allegedly dispersed the demonstration and arrested around 30 protesters.
- On December 23, 2020, university students held a protest in Çankaya, Ankara, demanding that authorities prioritize education funding in the 2021 annual budget, as well as decrying student loans during the pandemic. Police allegedly dispersed protesters and detained around five students.
- In addition, GCPEA identified at least one reported incident of an attack on a university building. On July 11, 2020, a media source reported that a militant group carried out an arson attack on a car in the parking lot of a university in Izmir.

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least 25 reported attacks on higher education affecting at least 440 students and personnel. In the majority of these incidents, police used excessive force against, or arbitrarily detained, university students and staff who were protesting education-related policies. Many protests related to the presidential appointments of two rectors at Boğaziçi University (BU) in January and August 2020 – Melih Bulu and Mehmet Naci İnci respectively – which bypassed established democratic norms for electing university rectors. Human Rights Watch noted that the lack of consultation in Bulu’s appointment undermined academic freedom and university autonomy. Following Bulu’s appointment, students and personnel of BU, along with other universities across the country, engaged in mass protests. In the protests, students and personnel expressed concern about his views on LGBT rights, and protests often involved students from BU’s LGBT community.

On February 7, 2021, the Boğaziçi Solidarity Platform reported that at least 560 students had been detained, 25 sentenced to house arrest, and 10 arrested; charges included “degrading or provoking the public to hatred and hostility” and “resisting to prevent the fulfilment of duty.” On April 19, 2021, prosecutors reportedly indicted 97 people who had participated in student protests in February, with prison terms of up to three years. Media sources reported in November 2021 that authorities had detained two BU students in solitary confinement for 49 days following a protest against Naci İnci in early October, and that another 12 students were on trial.

Examples of related protests include:

- Local and international media and Scholars at Risk reported that on January 4, 2021, hundreds of students and staff of BU protested in front of the campus against Melih Bulu’s appointment. Police reportedly clashed with demonstrators and fired rubber bullets and tear gas. In the night following the demonstration, police arrested at least 24 students from their homes.
- On January 30, 2021, police arrested five students at BU for their involvement in an art exhibition that involved a piece of art that mixed Islamic imagery with LGBT imagery, and texts and imagery on gender norms.
also raided a room used by a BU LGBT club and removed flags and books.1737

- On March 25, 2021, BU students, including LGBT students, held a demonstration outside campus, according to media reports and Scholars at Risk. Police detained at least 12 students, reportedly for holding LGBT flags. On March 26, 2021, a group of students then assembled to protest the earlier detentions, when police again dispersed the protest and arrested at least 25 students.1738

- Scholars at Risk and media sources reported that on August 23, 2021, police arrested eight students in Istanbul who were protesting the government’s appointment of Naci İnci as the new rector of BU.1739

- On October 22, 2021, police allegedly arrested over 45 students at BU when they dispersed a protest of students and academics against the university’s rector.1740

Police also used excessive force on students protesting a proposed policy to create gender-segregated universities. On February 16, 2021, female university students reportedly gathered in Cankaya, Ankara, to demonstrate against the government’s proposal to create women’s universities. Police intervened and detained ten female students, according to media reports.1741

Finally, GCPEA identified police interventions in two university student protests against the country’s Council of Higher Education in Istanbul and Ankara in early November 2021. At least 20 students were arrested, and others injured due to the use of tear gas.1742

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1695 GCPEA, Education under Attack 2020, Turkey chapter, pp. 236-239.


1699 “Military occupation of Syria by Turkey,” RULAC, updated April 15, 2021.


1702 Information received from a UN respondent via email on November 8, 2021.


1705 “Erdoğan appoints rectors to six universities,” Bianet, April 21, 2021.

1706 GCPEA, Education under Attack 2020, Turkey chapter, p. 236.

1707 A full list of references can be found on GCPEA’s website, https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/eua_2022_references.pdf


1711 A full list of references can be found on GCPEA’s website, https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/eua_2022_references.pdf

1712 GCPEA, Education under Attack 2020, Turkey chapter, p. 236.
6 more students suspended from Boğaziçi University for protesting appointed rector," Bianet, November 24, 2021.


1718 A Haber; Rudaw; Mezopotamya Agency; Sozcu; ANF News, as cited in ACLED, Event ID TUR11472. “Police detain students who came to courthouse in support of detained friends,” Bianet, March 26, 2021. Police detain students who came to courthouse in support of detained friends, Bianet, March 26, 2021. Scholars at Risk, Academic Freedom Monitor, Boğaziçi University, March 26, 2021.

1719 Human Rights Foundation of Turkey; Sozcu; Mezopotamya Agency, as cited in ACLED, Event ID TUR17867. Scholars at Risk, Academic Freedom Monitor, Boğaziçi University, March 26, 2021.
Monitor, Boğaziçi University, August 23, 2021.

