

# Life, Journey, Migration

## Enforced mobilization of an academic

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MINE GENCEL BEK

**Abstract:** This is a personal account of the recent and somewhat enforced and ambiguous mobility of an academic who was dismissed from her university because of the Peace Petition that she signed with hundreds of other scholars, who are known as the Peace Academics of Turkey. The author has been given the encouragement to write such a subjective account from a section of this journal which describes itself as a self-critical and open platform: »Intervention«. Academia needs interventions.

**Keywords:** migration, enforced mobilization, Peace Academics, Turkey, affective

### JOURNEY 1

In the morning of September 2, 2016, my husband and I, with our 10-year-old daughter, found ourselves on a plane to Paris. That summer, we had two international flights cancelled along with other reservations and lost quite a considerable amount of money. Thanks to the International Association for Media and Communication (IAMCR), our registration fees were reimbursed, as small compensation. IAMCR also put explanatory notes in our sessions that we had been unable to attend the conference and make our presentations because our freedom of movement had been rescinded: The rectorate of our school, Ankara University, had not given us permission to attend international academic conferences. The hidden »rationale« behind the prohibition was that I was one of the academics who had been accused by the Turkish authorities of being terrorists, upon signing a peace declaration.<sup>1</sup> This trip to Paris was an effort to cross the border in the face of ongoing pressure and recent attempts

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<sup>1</sup> | The Peace Petition »We Will Not Be a Party to This Crime«, signed by academics on January 11, 2016, called on the Turkish government to take measures to end the violence against the civilian population in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Following that, they received many

to prevent my movement. Perhaps I was hoping to leave the ›inconveniences‹ behind, still regretting it for those who I know would continue to suffer from the new conditions in Turkey; the journalists, students, academics, human rights activists who have done nothing more than position themselves in the oppositional side of the political spectrum and speak up. Liberating myself from the ›new standards of freedom‹ in Turkey, I was hoping to breathe better, at least for a while. Such was my mood just two days before the journey. Yet, what happened the next night, the night of September 1, (which is ironically known as Peace Day in Turkey) changed my mood. What I started to feel was not any kind of relief, but quite the contrary: it was as if I was insensitively leaving the country, while everyone else was being placed in a difficult situation or sent into exile. I had a sleepless night. The icon showing the messages on my phone alerted me that ›something bad‹ had happened again. We had witnessed many violations of human rights, especially in the last few years. The message enlightened me about a new one; a new decree was published to dismiss the many academics who had signed the peace petition. These people, many of whom I had had a chance to work with, had dedicated their lives to critical academic production. The government had assumed the power of issuing a law by decree rather than following the regular legislative processes in the Parliament, using the state of emergency in the aftermath of the military coup attempt of July 15, 2016, as a pretext. Since that day, it has become a rather unpleasant habit to find out about new decree-laws and examine them in detail, looking for our names and the names of our friends and colleagues.

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pressures including the President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan labelled all as a traitor, and terrorist; a right-wing mafia leader threatened these academics by saying that »we will shower with their blood«, and the AKP-supporting media (which is the majority of the media) published each academic's name and photograph and targeted all of them (to support peace academics, see [meccsa.org.uk](http://meccsa.org.uk)). Some academics who signed the petition were dismissed and more were subjected to disciplinary interrogations and criminal proceedings, many of which ended up with the verdict of imprisonment (the Anti-Terror Act, Article 7/2 calls for 15 months imprisonment) due to the accusation of carrying out propaganda for and supporting a terrorist organization. The Academics for Human Rights Newsletter of the *Supporting Academics as a Human Rights Actor in a Challenging Context* project, entitled *Ongoing Threats to Turkey's Academics for Peace and Violations of Human Rights* (April 2018), has used the data from the peace academics' network and has listed different forms of pressure, threats, harassment and restrictions at political, judicial and bureaucratic levels. For more details, see [tihvakademi.org](http://tihvakademi.org). For more updated information, see the web page of the Academics for Peace, [barisicinakademisyenler.net](http://barisicinakademisyenler.net).

The enthusiasm of my young daughter for Paris, which she had not seen before, prevented me from giving up on the trip. She was not unaware of what was happening; however, she was trying to put distance between her and the difficult realities of Turkey. She asked, »Mom, is it really the city of love? Does it smell like perfume?« My daughter had been asking whether there was a good place in the world for quite a while, in light of her observations that there were injustices every new place she visited. Yet she had not given up reserving the hope for the next place. Soon enough, she realized that Paris was not the place she was waiting for upon finding herself in the passport queue — which, unlike the EU line, was too long and too slow, and was filled by people like us, mostly black or brown. To make it worse, the streets and metro stations did not smell of perfume and there were many refugees lying on the streets.

For now, though, let's get back to the plane to meet Miyse. When we were seated on the plane, we saw a young and rather shy woman sitting in the window seat. She looked uncomfortable and insecure as if it was not her seat, as if she did not belong there. Her name was Miyse, a Syrian refugee who started living in the Turkish city of Hatay after the nursery where she worked was bombed. Her father had died in the civil war. Her brothers moved to Saudi Arabia while her mother chose to survive in Sudan. She was going to see her mother in another country because of the bitter irony that while her mother could not enter Turkey, Miyse could not enter Sudan. It is heartbreaking that there were borders between a mother and her child. Despite the language barriers, we started talking and continued in an amalgamation that included Turkish, English, and sign language. I advised her to enter a graduate program such as Arabic-Turkish translation, and informed her about scholarships. She listened quietly, contentedly even, to my efforts. Then I thought about my own life; since I was seven, I had believed in the merits of reading and learning, and had known no other way to live. Now, I was being threatened with dismissal at the age of 47 from the faculty where I had spent 30 years because of a declaration that demanded peace, and I was facing imprisonment. At that time, there was ›only‹ a disciplinary interrogation opened against me, like all my other colleagues who signed the peace petition at the same university. I had not yet been dismissed, and allegations of terrorism with seven years of imprisonment for *Academics for Peace* had not been put in place. Anyway, I focused on saving Miyse through education as if it had saved me! Traveling side by side, I realized the limits to what I could wish for my daughter: »If one day she finds war planes over her head, I hope she can find a safer place and survive like Miyse.« Then I realized how little I was expecting from life for my daughter. I was scared.

## JOURNEY 2

Two days after the dismissal from the university, we went on another journey. In Turkey, being dismissed from the university not only means losing your job, but also being saddled with multi-dimensional difficulties, the accumulation of which is called »civilian death«. You can no longer have health insurance or work in another university, public or private. Even if the dean or president of a private university wanted me in their institutions, I was told, the Higher Education Authority (YÖK in Turkish) would not approve my employment. Your friends hesitate to call or even write emails in fear of being monitored by the state. Your passport is invalidated, so you cannot leave the country. Anyway, our ›trip‹ to Germany on February 9 had been planned a few weeks earlier. After our dismissal, we were concerned about the invalidation of our passports, but no official authority could give us information on the status of them. Our flight from Ankara to Germany was via Istanbul. Our passports had probably already been invalidated, but we decided to take our chances in the hope that the state was not functioning efficiently. So, with the slight possibility that our passports were still valid, we gathered our suitcases, but left the washed clothes on the ironing board and the food in the refrigerator, including the homemade yogurt. We would come back after staying a couple days in Istanbul anyway — we did not have any real faith in passing the passport check. There was an extra check point for public officers holding green passports, like me. We could barely believe that, having checked with the computer, the officers stamped our passports as »approved«. It turned out that our passports had not yet been invalidated after all. We passed the second check with no problem, but did not inform friends and families because the officers might come stop us any moment before boarding was completed. Very recently, my PhD student from Spain, who had been writing a thesis on ISIS and new media, was taken into custody for several days in a sports hall. The authorities did not allow me to enter the building and translate for her and threatened me, stating that they would take me too, if I insisted on it. She was interrogated about reports that she had written as a journalist and then was held by the police until she was inside the plane ready for deportation. Then she lost her right to her status as a student. Remembering that, I was thinking the possibility of the police coming onto the plane before takeoff. It did not happen. Still, I was unable to feel happy after takeoff, because we could return to our country only when (if) our passports were accepted as valid and our innocence was granted. When? We didn't know. My daughter was crying: »I don't want to go on a journey when we don't know when we'll return.« It was hard to believe when considering the right to travel is a basic human right.

When we landed, I received a message from the host dean that he would be at the airport with our names on a paper and a driver to take us to a guesthouse. How different it was from the treatment I had received from my faculty deans who are spoiled by power and became the servants of the government.

We arrived in a small town in the evening. There was no grocery store like the ones we used to have in Ankara. Nevertheless, some unseen hand had filled the refrigerator with food, including our favorite feta cheese, *sujuk* and bread. We had two full refrigerators in two different countries, filled with essentially the same food. Our first guest came on that first night. By chance, my neighbor was a friend of a friend and came to see if everything was okay. Over the next few days, the German man was joined by his young African-born son who spoke some French and German. He tried to communicate with us through a rap song and a few negative words in English about Erdoğan, as if he was feeling what we were experiencing. In the morning a message came from him, saying that »the sun is born everywhere« and lessened the pain in my heart.

Despite the pressures that we had encountered after signing the Petition for Peace in January 2016, I did not apply for an academic position abroad (or to the associations supporting academics at risk) until October 2016, believing that the academics dismissed before me would need these positions more. However, this gesture of solidarity, depriving myself of the chance to work, lost its meaning in any practical sense with the dismissal of thousands of academics following the July 15 ›coup attempt‹. So, it was a great relief when the university that invited me made an effort to provide support for more than the initial period, not only because of my academic merit but also as a manifestation of their solidarity, remembering the Germany of the 1930s. A few days later, my German friend, a retired professor who had helped me during the invitation process for the university, came to see us with a huge suitcase from the other side of the country, filled with books on media studies. He hugged us all separately. That was the moment that once again, I felt that common blood and common country were not what mattered. Human values and solidarity around them could travel beyond borders.

We were not that lucky in finding a permanent home. Many people, especially those of Turkish origin living in the city, blamed this on the ›Syrians‹. According to their accounts, the German state had given Syrians homes in a university town where there were not many vacant houses. »Rightly, the hosts do not want to give up their homes«, said a Turkish woman, working at a grocery store, who had only immigrated fifteen years before the Syrians did. She was complaining about »dirty Arabs«. My objections did not reach her heart, and she defended her position without even a trace of rephrase. It is so unfortunate that those who were once immigrants can be so

hostile to another group of immigrants and refugees. When I was trying to help the Syrian woman who I had encountered on the previous trip, I did not know that my own child would become classmates with Syrian refugee children at a difficult-to-find school in a German town — with all these children trying to ›integrate‹ and learn a foreign language. Nor did I know at that time that an official from the ›Ausländer‹ office would not even try to understand my situation and instead would tell me to go back to Turkey to extend my visa, and if that was not an option, then to apply to live in a refugee camp.

I was also surprised to find out that my husband’s Turkish acquaintance, who tried to help us to find a house, would almost be excluded from his own circle because of us. There was a group of Turkish people who still sympathized with President Erdoğan and considered everyone that he considered an enemy as their own enemies, ›traitors‹ really. It was so ironic that this time we were seen enemies because of being perceived as FETÖ supporters.<sup>2</sup> I had been dismissed from the university, and that meant we had to be supporters of either FETÖ or the PKK. That was the perception of the mosque community there. Religion was not a part of our identity and life at all, and our acquaintance defended us with the fact that we drank alcohol, I wore a mini skirt, and my husband was an Alawite with a leftist moustache. Later we heard that some people from that group themselves had negative reactions from some Germans for their unyielding support for Erdoğan. »Go back to your country if you like it so much!«, they said to these Turks after Erdoğan’s insulting, inappropriate, and provocative words equating Germans with Nazis. The relative balance that they had established with their years and years of hard work could be broken so easily, I thought, and I felt sorry for them. There were other things I also felt sorry about, such as the 45-year-old woman from Dersim who looked more like a 60-year-old. She was attending a *Volkschule* to learn German for the first time, and the reason for that was she could only find time after her kids started university. Just like Miyse, the young Syrian woman that I met on the plane, things could have been different for this old lady if she had gone to school and learned the German language. I then met a Kurdish man who was sorry that his sons had forgotten their mother tongue, Kurdish, while learning German. It seemed as if he was trying to connect with his roots through making traditional *yufka* bread. He was saying that without that bread, life was impossible in a country famous for its broad variety of breads.

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2 | FETÖ is an acronym used for »Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü«, i.e. »the terrorist organization of Fethullah Gülen«. The government has held the religious sect of the Gülen Movement responsible for the failed military coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016.

We now live in a green town near the city of Siegen. It rains a lot here and I find myself checking the weather forecast of the cities in Turkey almost every day; the cities that I was born in, lived in and wanted to die in. The owner of the house we rent is a Turkish guest worker who came to Germany in the 1970s and worked at a quarry for years. He settled in this town thinking that the fresh weather and forest would be good for his asthma, a common legacy of mining. We had encountered in the same town for completely different reasons.

That is the end of my notes here on the journey to Germany and the first few days of my stay. I still do not know the answer to the question that I ask myself, the same one that an AfD supporter I met in the election campaign asked me: »When are you going back to your country?«

## POSTSCRIPT

One-and-a-half years have passed since I started writing these two ›journeys‹. Even though the state of emergency has been lifted, at least officially, not much has changed for critical academics, intellectuals, journalists and human rights advocates in Turkey. There is still a travel ban in Turkey for those who have been dismissed by decree. The suspension, for example, of my passport violates not only my freedom but also the freedom of my daughter, who is a 12-year-old child, and it makes her feel ›exiled‹. Since we cannot leave Turkey again, we cannot go »home.« The situation is much worse for the other signatories of the Peace Petition who are still trapped in Turkey. They are unemployed, forbidden from working in any other position, cannot leave the country even if they find positions abroad, and have no social security or access to free health service. The court case against the Peace Academics has resulted in imprisonment for more than one year on allegations of »supporting terrorism.« Yet, despite all the criminalization and restrictive conditions, critical academic production continues, by writing books, articles, and blog posts, and sharing stories with the public on alternative platforms beyond the borders.





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**Therese Lerchl** hat Geographien der Globalisierung an der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt studiert. Sie interessiert sich für die Verschränkung von Geographie und Recht unter dem Blickwinkel der Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie (ANT) und Performativität. Ihre Themen sind Migration, Aufenthalts- und Asylrecht, bürokratische Praktiken und Dokumente.

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**Thomas Müller** ist Politikwissenschaftler und Historiker. 2008 promovierte er an der RWTH Aachen über völkisch-nationalistische Konzepte der deutschen Westgrenze. Neben antirassistischer Arbeit in regionalen Kontexten forschte und veröffentlichte er u.a. über Grenzregime, Raumkonzepte der europäischen Integration und NS-Westforschung. Aus Recherchen in Calais resultierte der Band *Dynamiken der Jungles. Calais und das europäisch-britische Grenzregime*. Er arbeitet im Stadtarchiv Aachen.

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# mOvements

Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies

Vol. 4, Issue 2/2018

ISSN 2509-8322

[transcript]