

Hypocrisy: Western media publishes Erdogan while Turkey jails journalists for terrorism

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Some created [paintings](#), others filmed [documentaries](#). Some reported in Turkish, others in Kurdish. All were charged with various crimes against the state; many were accused of terrorism. As of this month, [237 journalists and media workers](#) in Turkey were in jail simply for doing their jobs, more than any other country in the world.

The leader whose crackdown on democracy allowed them to be accused— Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan— is published uncritically in Western media, by publications whose staff enjoy freedoms that journalists in Turkey no longer have.

Last month, as journalists from Dokuz8 Haber, DHA, and Cumhuriyet were [attacked](#) by Turkish police for covering the 700th week of peaceful protests against enforced disappearances, Erdogan placed an editorial in the [New York Times](#). In 2017, one month after JINHA founding editor Zehra Dogan was arrested for depicting the

destruction of Nusaybin, he [argued](#) that Turkey was “defending democratic values” in the Guardian. A year before that, when Cumhuriyet journalists Ceyda Karan and Hikmet Çetinkaya were [prosecuted](#) for reprinting a satirical cartoon and JINHA reporter Beritan Canozar was accused of being a member of a terrorist organization for reporting on state violence in Sur, he condemned the world, with no sense of irony, for [allowing human rights violations](#) in Syria.

Erdogan’s most recent editorial ran yesterday, when the Wall Street Journal allowed him to [argue](#) against the upcoming operation to clear terrorist groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra from Syria’s Idlib. Hours after the piece was published, his security forces arrested Max Zirngast, an Austrian writer and activist living in Ankara— on terror charges.

Zirngast had written [extensively](#) on Turkish politics, discussing leftist movements, the Kurdish struggle, and the path that led the country to a place where journalists were treated like a greater security threat than Syrian jihadist factions were. He elevated the work of Turkish and Kurdish activists who would never get the media platform that the regime that persecutes them does. For that, he became the latest victim of a war on media that the mainstream Western press seems to want to ignore.

There is no good reason for any media outlet to publish the unedited views of a world leader who has gone to such lengths to target journalism. When every piece published by such a leader can correspond to a contemporaneous attack on free media by that leader’s regime, the hypocrisy is too great, and the cost too high, to justify it.

Some would argue that the views of people with such influence over international events are valuable information that should be printed on that basis, regardless of the nature of their policies. This presumes that readers cannot see those views themselves, and that the world’s most powerful politicians writing for elite media outlets will present themselves accurately— two false assumptions.

Media consumers have any number of other ways to learn what Erdogan believes about Syria or about Turkey’s relationship with the United States. Any number of reporters have made that information available. Their work is also likely subject to far stricter editorial standards than the PR firms that draft Erdogan’s op-eds are. No journalist whose reporting passes through a fact-checker could write that “Turkey has succeeded in fighting terrorist groups...without harming or displacing civilians” six months after 400,000 people were forced out of Afrin by an operation that involved jihadist groups, or mention Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as a “designated terrorist organization” without noting that the Turkish government only listed it as such a week ago.

In the West, where the ascending far-right makes its distaste for journalism clear and the U.S. President refers to the press as “enemies of the people,” media organizations should understand the fragility, and necessity, of press freedom. Yet this understanding stops at the water’s edge: media companies lauded the U.S. Congress for passing a resolution declaring that the press is not the enemy of the people, without questioning how those same politicians vote to arm far-right governments, like the AKP in Turkey, that charge journalists with terrorism.

If the international media is to choose solidarity with those who share their profession over solidarity with those who share their governments’ interests, they will take the platform they have given to Erdogan and offer it to one of the many journalists he has threatened, arrested, or forced to flee the country. Most readers of the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times know the Turkish president’s views on Washington, Idlib, or democracy. They are unlikely to know the stories of the media workers the Turkish state has attacked, or the political context in which those attacks occurred.

A reader who wants to understand what Erdogan’s rule means will learn infinitely more from the stories of the people it has targeted than from the regime itself. As long as it is illegal in Turkey for a journalist to write that the government is a “fascist dictatorship”, the media must listen to the minorities, leftists, dissidents, academics, and others who stand against that dictatorship— and refuse to print its propaganda.