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17 Apr 2017 / Dickson Monk

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Unfortunately, Abdülhamit Bilici, a leading Turkish newspaper executive now living in exile, will likely not return to his homeland anytime soon. The [landmark vote in Turkey](#) yesterday granting sweeping powers to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan means oppositional voices, like Bilici's, will not find welcome in Turkey until, possibly, 2029.

Recently, the [Columbia World Affairs Council](#), working with the Atlantic Institute of South Carolina, hosted Bilici at a luncheon to discuss the recent turbulence in Turkey, his experiences as a journalist, and the essential role of free press in a democracy.

Bilici is in exile following recent political unrest and government oppression of the media in Turkey, which now holds [an alarming number of journalists in prison](#). Before leaving the country, Bilici served as editor-in-chief of the newspaper Zaman Daily, the largest daily newspaper in Turkey, and CEO of its English-language version, Today's Zaman – both of which have been [shut down](#) and archival material removed from the Internet as of March 2016. Bilici also served as general director of the Cihan News Agency and editor of Aksiyon Weekly Magazine. He now lives in the US, his status still in limbo.

To put the recent events in perspective, consider President Trump getting so fed up with the New York Times that he raids its offices, replaces the staff with his own advisers before shutting it down, erasing all of its archives from the internet, and jailing its staff. Now, leading New York Times journalist Dean Baquet is reporting from London, but no one in the US can see his tweets. Then, Trump, through popular vote, is given unprecedented presidential power essentially muting any checks and balances for the unforeseeable future.

That's [what happened to Bilici](#). For now, his property and assets seized and jail awaiting him at home, he struggles to find the ability to work in the US to support his wife and children.

“Turkey has been a vital U.S. ally for decades, but the recent, escalating crackdown on the opposition calls into question the sustainability of this partnership,” says Dr. Akif Aydin, president of the Atlantic Institute of South Carolina. “The Turkish government’s increasing repression of dissidents and minorities also threatens the country’s hard-won democracy. At a time when Erdogan is aggressively seeking to expand his presidential powers, its domestic and foreign impact remains a separate question.”



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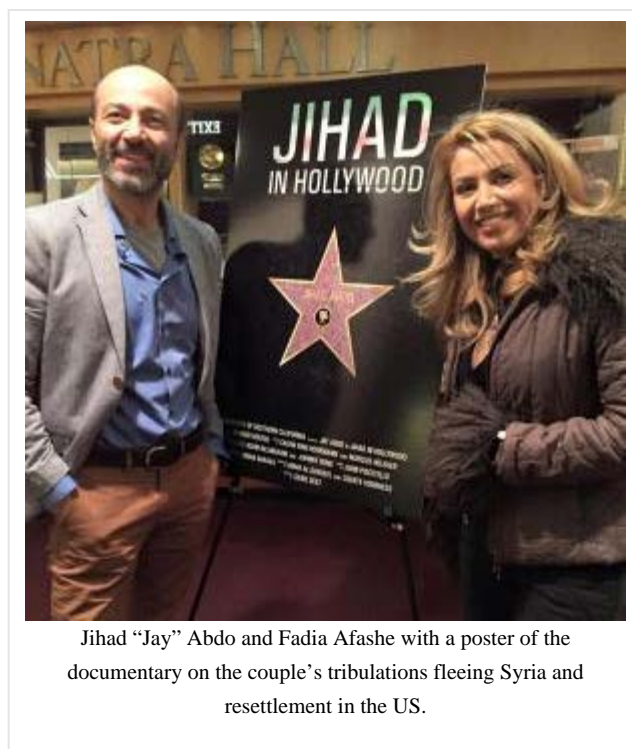
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Bilici's future and that of the free press in Turkey remains uncertain.

Yesterday's vote for expansion of Erdogan's powers does not bode well for either, but any educated predictions still remain a tenuous gamble. These are uncertain times for many. Among them, the millions who have fled Turkey's neighboring country, Syria. By [some estimates](#), Turkey has taken in a little under three million people fleeing the atrocities of the Syrian Civil War. US foreign and domestic policy to Syrian refugees and the Civil War now tops our national headlines.

The Conversation Continues with CWAC and CMA this week

On Thursday, April 20, there will be another local opportunity to continue the conversation on these important global issues. The Columbia World Affairs Council, with the Columbia Museum of Art, co-hosts [Jihad in Hollywood](#), an evening of film, music, and art with two renowned Syrian artists discussing their experiences as refugees



Jihad "Jay" Abdo and Fadia Afashe with a poster of the documentary on the couple's tribulations fleeing Syria and resettlement in the US.

living in America. The evening begins with a screening of "Jihad in Hollywood," a [short documentary](#) on Syrian film star Jihad (Jay) Abdo and his wife, visual artist and women's rights activist Fadia Afashe. The documentary follows their experiences as accomplished Syrians resettling in America as refugees from the Syrian crisis. The evening will include a Q&A discussion moderated by Heather Williams, a senior international/defense policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, along with a violin performance by Abdo and a viewing of selected artworks by Afashe.

In 2011 Abdo, one of Syria's most prominent actors—having starred in 23 plays, 43 movies, and over 1,000 TV episodes—left his home country as his unwillingness to endorse Bashar al-Assad's regime put him in personal danger.

In America with assets frozen, property confiscated, and with a name many Americans equate with militant Islam, Abdo found himself working as a Domino's pizza delivery driver. Since the documentary was filmed, Abdo has starred in "Queen of the Desert" with Nicole Kidman, "A Hologram for the King" with Tom Hanks, and "Bon Voyage," which was nominated for Best Live Action Short Film for the 2017 Academy Awards.

At the rise of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Fadia Afashe left Damascus for the United States to pursue a fellowship at the Humphrey School for Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, which she completed in May 2012. Afashe is a graduate of the Ismail Institute of Art with a criminal law degree from the University of Damascus and a master's degree from the Syrian-French Institute for Public Administration (l'ena). With the assistance of the Geneva Institute for Human Rights, Afashe wrote and produced "Suspended," a short film about women exposing how the laws of rape in the Arab world leave women unprotected and disenfranchised. Currently, Fadia works at the RAND Corporation and shows her art in Los Angeles.

The evening at the CMA is the latest in number of events this year by the Columbia World Affairs Council bringing global issues home to Columbia while highlighting Soda City's close international relations. So far this year, we have been visited by the former presidents of Tunisia and Haiti.

Jihad in Hollywood: An Evening of Film, Music, and Art is free and open to the public at 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, April 20, at the Columbia Museum of Art (Hampton & Main).

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