



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

1219 N Santa Rita Ave
The University of Arizona
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520 621-5850
520 626-9095 fax
caf@mesana.org
www.mesana.org



15 May 2014

Mr. Jeh Charles Johnson
Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528
via fax 202-612-1976

Dear Secretary Johnson,

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association to express our deep concern about the decision, apparently made at the request of the U.S. government, to deny Dr. İsmail Beşikçi and his traveling companion permission to board a U.S.-bound flight from Istanbul on April 20, 2014, despite their having valid U.S. visas in their possession.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Dr. Beşikçi is a much published and highly regarded scholar of Kurdish history and society in Turkey. He was invited by the Center for Peacebuilding and Development of the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D.C. to give a lecture on April 22, 2014. Dr. Besikci and his traveling companion, Mr. Ismail Gubruz, director of the İsmail Beşikçi Vakfi, a nonprofit cultural foundation, were interviewed at the U.S. consulate in Istanbul on April 11, 2014, and received their U.S. visas shortly thereafter. However, when Dr. Beşikçi and Mr. Gubruz went to Istanbul's Atatürk Airport on April 20, 2014, they were not allowed to board their flight to the United States; airport personnel told them that this denial originated with U.S. authorities.

Inquiries by the media to Ms. Jan Psaki, the State Department spokesperson, have been met with a refusal to comment as to whether the denial of boarding originated with the U.S. government or not. Preventing a recognized scholar and intellectual from traveling to speak on his area of expertise at the invitation of an American institution of higher education is contrary to the principles of academic freedom, freedom of speech, and the free exchange of ideas. To do so with no explanation is even more disturbing and outrages the sensibilities of a democratic society. Dr. Beşikçi has for decades been subject to persecution by the Turkish government for

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researching, writing, and commenting on Kurdish matters, and for advocating for the rights of Turkey's Kurdish minority. Unfortunately, this recent incident suggests that the U.S. government has become complicit in the Turkish government's effort to silence a distinguished scholar and prevent him from sharing his views with the American public.

We therefore urge you in the strongest possible terms to immediately investigate this incident and to make public whether or not the April 20, 2014 denial of boarding to Dr. Beşikçi came about as the result of a request by the U.S. government or any of its agencies. We further urge you to do all that is within your power to make it possible for Dr. Beşikçi to come to the United States in the near future so that his fellow scholars, and other Americans, can engage with him and his perspectives and thereby become better informed on matters of genuine public interest.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Brown', written in a cursive style.

Nathan Brown
MESA President

cc:

Senator Tom Carper, chair, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs (fax 202-228-2190)

Representative Michael McCaul, chair, U.S. House of Representatives Committee on
Homeland Security (fax 202-226-3399)

Dr. R. Bowen Loftin, chair, Homeland Security Academic Advisory Council
(AcademicEngagement@hq.dhs.gov, Chancellor_Office@missouri.edu)