



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

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Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan
Office of the Prime Minister
Basbakanlik
06573 Ankara, Turkey

Via facsimile +90 312 417 0476

May 27, 2005

Dear Prime Minister Erdogan:

I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, and its Committee on Academic Freedom, in order to express our grave concern over actions taken by members of your government which precipitated the decision of the rector of Bosphorus University to cancel an academic conference entitled, "Ottoman Armenians in the Period of the Empire's Collapse." These actions violate the academic freedom and human rights of Turkish scholars, a number of whom are members of our association.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) comprises 2600 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. It is the preeminent professional association in the field and publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. MESA is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the region and in connection with the study of the Middle East and North Africa. The organization also counts among its membership many of the world's leading experts on the history of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey.

The conference was to have been held May 25-27, 2005 at Bosphorus University in Istanbul. Organized by members of the history, sociology and comparative literature faculties of both Bosphorus and Sabanci universities, the conference sought to address in a scholarly, open and critical manner issues surrounding the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Aided by an international advisory committee of academics from Turkey and abroad, the conference's organizers adhered in their preparations to all Turkish laws regarding public assemblies and academic gatherings.

However, according to published press reports, following intense criticism by Turkish government officials and parliamentarians—including Minister of Justice, Cemil Çiçek, who accused those organizing the conference of being guilty of "treason and insult"—the university officials cancelled the meetings just hours before they were to begin. Citing "prejudicial statements [which] have been advanced [by government officials] regarding the contents of a conference that is yet to be held," the university officials noted that these statements give "cause for concern that [they] will result in undermining the academic freedom of state universities."

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Turkey is required to protect freedom of thought, expression and assembly. These rights are also enshrined in the Turkish Constitution of 1982.

Therefore we urge your government to take all necessary steps to ensure that this conference may be held as planned and as soon as possible. Just as important, and particularly given Justice Minister Çiçek's use of the word "treason," a charge that conjures up memories of some of worst forms of persecution of scholars and intellectuals through history, we ask that you assure conference participants and organizers that they will face no official criminal charges or other sanctions following the presentation of their research in this gathering. We ask that you ensure there will be no attempts to censor their work prior to its presentation and further, that all measures required will be taken to secure the personal safety of conference participants and allow open and free academic exchange. Finally, we encourage you to preclude the implementation of any of the provisions of Article 305 of the new Turkish Penal Code, which could be used to arrest academics who express unpopular ideas or revisionist views of the past.

I would appreciate the honor of discussing the work of the Middle East Studies Association with you during your visit to Washington, DC in June if your schedule permits.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ALIBANUAZI' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Ali Banuazizi
President, Middle East Studies Association
Professor, Boston College

CC: H.E. Dr. Osman Faruk Logoglu,
Turkish Ambassador to the United States

AB/nh