



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

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**MESA**  
November 17-20  
Montréal

February 7, 2007

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Başbakanlık  
06573 Ankara, Turkey  
Via facsimile +90 312 417 0476

Dear Prime Minister Erdoğan:

I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom in order to express our dismay and grave concern over the expulsion of Prof. Dr. Atilla Yayla from his faculty position at Gazi University. Dr. Yayla was summarily dismissed after he spoke on a panel in Izmir organized by the youth branch of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which you lead. Professor Yayla also faces possible prosecution under Law 5816 and/or Article 301 of the Penal Code.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (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 more than 2700 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.

Because of our mandate, we have previously sent you letters of concern on January 25, 2007 (regarding Dr. Taner Akçam), July 20, 2006 (regarding Elif Şafak), November 30, 2005 (regarding Fatih Taş), November 20, 2005 (regarding Orhan Pamuk), June 23, 2005 (regarding Yektan Türkyılmaz), and May 27, 2005 (regarding the cancellation of an academic conference to address issues surrounding the Armenian Genocide of 1915).

In the case of Dr. Yayla, according to the Turkish media, instead of defending academic freedom as is the responsibility of any university, President of Gazi University Rektörü Prof. Dr. Kadri Yamaç denounced Dr. Yayla's exercise of freedom of expression. Subsequently, the Izmir Public Prosecutor's office launched an investigation into his "heretical thoughts," raising the possibility that he, like Pamuk, Şafak and others, will be tried for "insulting Turkishness." The right of individuals to freely express nonviolent opinions has been progressively undermined in Turkey, fomenting a climate of intimidation and fear.

The tolerance for the suppression of critical thought debases the important achievements your government has made in democratic reform. Professor Yayla has done nothing more than to re-interpret the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and to argue that the single-party period under his leadership (1925-1945) fell short of meeting the criteria of a liberal democracy. It is in fact the role of a scholar to foster the pursuit of knowledge, promote the constant development of ideas, and rigorously interrogate beliefs and assumptions. As Dr. Yayla correctly notes, an academic should be “free to think, to search and share findings.”

The Middle East Studies Association is deeply concerned with the deteriorating situation of academic freedom in Turkey. We urge your government to give the highest priority to eliminating Article 301 without delay. This clause has tarnished Turkey’s international image and impedes its ability to meet the standards of free speech as required by the European Union’s accession criteria.

We ask that you instruct the Prosecutor General to drop any criminal charges that may be filed against Professor Yayla and take all necessary steps to press for his reinstatement.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Zachary Lockman". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Zachary Lockman  
MESA President