



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

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577

Fax 520-207-3166

caf@mesana.org

mesana.org



3 August 2021

H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
President of the Republic of Turkey
T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Genel Sekreterliği
06689 Çankaya, Ankara
Turkey

Dear President Erdoğan:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our outrage over the termination of the contracts of two professors at Boğaziçi University by the Acting-Rector, Mehmet Naci İnci, himself a replacement for Melih Bulu, the Rector whom you appointed over the protest of Boğaziçi faculty and students earlier this year. We condemn the contract terminations of Professors Can Candan and Feyzi Erçin and demand their immediate reinstatement to their positions. We also urge you to remove Dr. İnci as Acting-Rector and allow the faculty of Boğaziçi University to select a Rector, in keeping with their long tradition of autonomous university governance.

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 2800 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.

We have written to you numerous times earlier this year concerning your government's inappropriate interventions in the administration of Boğaziçi University and your appointment as Rector of Melih Bulu, a controversial and unqualified candidate who remains under the shadow of plagiarism allegations. Bulu was removed from his position by your government on 15 July 2021 and replaced by his deputy, İnci, who is a professor of physics at the university. It is worth noting that we do not consider your removal of Bulu as any more legitimate than his appointment, since in both instances the decisions were taken by presidential decree and without any consideration for norms of academic freedom and faculty governance at Boğaziçi University. Moreover, the replacement of Bulu by Acting-Rector İnci hardly signifies an improvement in the administration of the university. Indeed, İnci served as a loyal deputy to Bulu, repressing faculty protests and inviting police and security forces onto the campus to detain protesting students.

Since your appointment of Bulu, numerous violations of the right to education and norms of academic freedom have occurred at Boğaziçi. We have written four letters on the subject and the MESA Board has also issued a statement (see our letters dated [7 January 2021](#), [20 January 2021](#), [4 February 2021](#) and [9 February 2021](#); and the Board Statement issued on [12 February 2021](#)). İnci took an active part in the violations documented in

these letters. Most recently, he terminated the contracts of Can Candan and Feyzi Erçin, overruling the decisions to approve their courses and continuing contracts by the departments in which they served. It is worth underscoring that İnci is entirely unqualified to independently evaluate either Candan or, given that his expertise is in physics whereas both of them teach in the film studies certificate program. Furthermore, İnci trampled on traditions of university governance when he ignored the faculty's 9 February 2021 election of economics professor Ünal Zenginobuz to head the Institute of Social Sciences. Instead, İnci appointed himself to run the institute—another position for which he was unqualified. In another move along these lines, İnci overruled the university's regular peer review system for appointments and promotions, reversing a negative evaluation of a promotion dossier by the Boğaziçi Academic Council and unilaterally promoting the faculty member in question to full professorship.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of İnci's disdain for academic freedom, freedom of expression, and students' right to education was his failure to defend students who were brutally attacked by campus security and riot police during a peaceful protest on campus and then taken into custody for carrying LGBTI+ flags. Instead, he doubled down on this repression by opening disciplinary investigations against the student protesters and ensuring that they would face the most severe punishments. He also signed off on decisions to restrict access to the campus for retired and part-time faculty members and, as of 13 April 2021, he stopped signing contracts for some retired and part-time faculty members who had been approved by their departments and schools to offer courses. In addition, İnci has been complicit in the dismantling of antidiscrimination protections put in place by his predecessor to protect students experiencing bias on the basis of gender and sexual orientation. Indeed, he directly contributed to such discrimination with the 2 February 2021 closure of the BULGBTI+ Student Club and the termination of the contract of the director of the Coordination Office for Prevention, Education and Support of Victims of Sexual Harassment, which resulted in the de facto closure of that office. Despite entreaties from numerous departments underscoring the importance of the office, he has allowed its de facto closure. Moreover, during his tenure as Vice-Rector, and while he was acting as Provost, a significant number of women were removed from their positions, allegedly on the grounds that the Rector felt "more comfortable around men"—resulting in a university administration composed almost entirely of men.

The long list of grievances against İnci includes his violation of all of the basic norms of university governance: academic freedom, democratic values, gender equity, protection of students from discriminatory treatment and respect for freedom of expression. He is currently a candidate to serve as the new permanent Rector of the university. We strongly urge your government to desist from the practice of appointing rectors and to restore to Boğaziçi and all other public universities in the country the right to autonomous governance and to select their own rectors. We also demand the reversal of the arbitrary decisions İnci has taken to terminate faculty contracts in

apparent retaliation against academics who have expressed solidarity with student protests or engaged in protests themselves.

The details of İnci's actions in terminating the contracts of Erçin and Candan are instructive. In May, İnci, then serving in an acting capacity while Bulu was on a short leave (25-31 May 2021), prevented Feyzi Erçin, a part-time faculty member who had lectured on music in cinema at Boğaziçi for more than eight years, from offering the courses he had been scheduled to give during the summer and fall terms of 2021. In explaining the irregular and last-minute decision to cancel the courses, İnci offered unsubstantiated criticism of Erçin's grading practices and declared, without offering evidence, that his teaching had a "negative impact" on the quality of education offered at the university. Student and faculty responses to the cancelation of Erçin's classes, as well as contemporaneous [media coverage](#), indicate that Erçin was actually terminated due to his high profile support for student and faculty protests against Bulu's appointment. Erçin himself gave a public statement decrying İnci's decision and noting that in the fifteen prior courses he had offered at Boğaziçi his grading was consistent with the university's averages, while acknowledging that, like many other faculty members, he had graded slightly more leniently during the pandemic to offset the many challenges students faced in completing courses under lockdown.

Unfortunately, İnci has continued to retaliate against faculty in his new capacity as Acting-Rector, as is clear from his termination of the contract of Can Candan, a beloved lecturer in the Department of Western Languages and Literatures who had been a member of the teaching faculty at Boğaziçi for over fourteen years. Candan, a documentary filmmaker and academic, not only taught courses in film studies, but also served as the faculty advisor of the LGBTI+ Student Club at the university. The pattern of persecution of the student members of this club described above suggests that Candan, too, was removed not only in retaliation for his role in protests, but also as part of a discriminatory campaign being waged on the Boğaziçi campus by your appointees. In a statement protesting Candan's termination, the faculty association of Boğaziçi University [wrote](#) that the action was neither consistent with the law nor with the university's governance rules administered by their academic senate. They denounced Candan's termination as part of a pattern of arbitrary and unjust actions taken by government-appointed administrators at the university and declared their intention to act in solidarity with both Candan and Erçin as they legally contest their terminations.

Notwithstanding the removal of Bulu, Boğaziçi student and faculty protests are continuing in part due to your support for İnci and the arbitrary actions he has taken. Ultimately, it is your government's disregard for norms of university governance and academic freedom that remains the basic target of these protests. The actions of your government and your appointed administrators undermine the reputation and academic integrity of one of Turkey's most prestigious universities, while adding to the more general

pattern under your leadership of actions damaging the autonomy and quality of higher education in Turkey. We urge you to end this pattern and restore respect for university autonomy across the country, including at Boğaziçi University.

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Turkey is required to protect freedom of thought, expression and assembly. Turkey is also a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), all of which protect the rights to freedom of expression and association, which are at the heart of academic freedom. The rights being trampled by your government's actions are also enshrined in articles 25-27 and 42 of the Turkish Constitution.

We call on your government to restore the tradition of university self-government in Turkey, withdraw your support from İnci as Acting-Rector of Boğaziçi University and allow the university to return to its traditional practice of selecting its own rectors. We also call for Professors Candan and Erçin to be reinstated in their positions as lecturers at the university.

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

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor Emerita, University of Southern California

cc:

Ibrahim Kalın, Chief Advisor to the President and Presidential Spokesman
Mustafa Şentop, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı (President of the Turkish National Assembly)
Abdülhamit Gül, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanı (Justice Minister of the Republic of Turkey)
Yekta Saraç, Türkiye Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of the Turkish Higher Education Council)
Ziya Selçuk, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Eğitim Bakanı (Minister of Education of the Republic of Turkey)

Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the
European Parliament

Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign
Affairs and Security Policy

Fiona Knab-Lunny, Member of Cabinet of Josep Borrell, High Representative of
the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Hannah Neumann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on
Human Rights

Raphael Glucksmann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on
Human Rights

Christian Danielsson, Director-General for Enlargement at the European
Commission

Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

Nacho Sanchez Amor, Member of European Parliament and European Parliament
Standing Turkey Rapporteur

Verónica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, United Nations High Commissioner for Human
Rights

Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of
the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Koumbou Boly Barry, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü (Office of the Rector of Boğaziçi University)

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Mezunlar Derneği (Boğaziçi University Alumni Association)

Matthew A Palmer, Deputy Assistant Secretary, United States Department of State
American Physics Association

European Physics Letter Editorial Office

German Physics Society

Società Italiana di Fisica

The Royal Society of Sciences (UK)

4th Physikalisches Institut, Stuttgart University (Germany)