



**Middle
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October 26, 2018

Dr. Kristina M. Johnson
Chancellor
The State University of New York
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Dr. Maryalice Mazzara
Director of Educational Programs
Office of Global Affairs
The State University of New York
Maryalice.Mazzara@suny.edu

Dear Chancellor Johnson and Dr. Mazzara:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our deep distress at the decision of the State University of New York (SUNY) Global Center in Manhattan to sponsor a panel discussion on 2 November 2018 in conjunction with the Turkish Council of Higher Education (known by its Turkish acronym as YÖK). Established in 1982 to oversee the Turkish system of higher education, YÖK has in recent years played a key role in the harassment and dismissal of thousands of Turkish university faculty and staff on the orders of the Turkish government, in egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom. In this context the panel's title – "Searching for the Future, Preservation of the Academic Heritage in the Middle East" – is the height of hypocrisy. Given YÖK's complicity in the purging of Turkish faculty and academic staff on purely political grounds, we do not believe that SUNY or any of its components should collaborate with it or treat it as a legitimate academic entity.

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 2500 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.

MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom and other organizations, including [Scholars at Risk](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#), have thoroughly documented the Turkish government's relentless campaign against faculty, staff and administrators at that country's institutions of higher education and its wholesale violations of academic freedom. We call your attention to our committee's most recent [letter](#) on Turkey, dated 17 July 2018, protesting the dismissal by government decree of an additional 206 academic personnel from 63 public universities in Turkey along with another 52 academic administrative personnel from 24 universities, and to our many other [letters](#) denouncing the assault against Turkish academics and universities. All told, since the July 2016 attempted coup d'état the Turkish authorities, with the active collaboration of YÖK (see for example <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20170715061722938>), have dismissed nearly 6000 university personnel. Few of those dismissed have been restored to their former positions, and most of them are permanently barred from employment in the public sector. The government's claim that all of these faculty and university administrative personnel are guilty of conspiracy against the state has been widely debunked; yet many of them face criminal prosecution simply for failing to conform to the views of Turkey's increasingly authoritarian president and ruling party.



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It is therefore outrageous that any self-respecting institution of higher education would associate itself with, and thereby lend legitimacy to, YÖK, which has lost whatever independence and credibility it may once have had. Today this entity serves to provide cover for the Turkish government's campaign to destroy the autonomy and integrity of Turkey's institutions of higher education and to violate the academic freedom of its scholars and educators. We therefore call on SUNY to immediately cancel the 2 November 2018 panel discussion at the SUNY Global Center, to publicly disassociate itself from YÖK, and to vigorously reaffirm its commitment to the defense of academic freedom, in Turkey and elsewhere.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. E. Tucker".

Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy W. Newhall".

Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director