

Stanford University

**Department of History
Stanford, CA 94305-2024**

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

Per fax: +90 312 417 0476

Dear Prime Minister Erdogan,

At its meeting last week, the Council of the American Historical Association asked me to express to you its grave concern about the cancellation of the conference on "Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Issues of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy," which was to be held at Bosphorus University on 25-27 May 2005.

As I am sure you are aware, this conference was to bring together Turkish scholars from several disciplines in order to discuss the fate of the Armenian minority in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. The conference was called off following a number of attacks by leading politicians, including Cemil Cicek, the Minister of Justice. So intense and inflammatory were these criticisms that the conference organizers were justifiably concerned about the security of the participants.

The American Historical Association is the leading organization of historians in the United States, with over 13,000 members, including a number of prominent scholars interested in Turkish and Ottoman history. Needless to say, the Association does not have a position on the fate of the Armenians, but it is deeply committed to free and open inquiry about historical issues, and especially about those issues that have been charged with political and ideological animosities. The May Conference was to have been a forum in which a variety of voices could have been heard. It is a grave misfortune, both for Turkey and for the world of historical scholarship, that political pressures silenced these voices.

I write to you, Mr. Prime Minister, with the hope that you will use the powers of your office to create a climate in which scholars have the opportunity and the resources to pursue the truth. This means having access to the relevant materials and also the freedom to speak without fear of intimidation and retaliation. In the long run, everyone's interests are best served by allowing uninhibited and open inquiry and debate.

With my gratitude for your time and attention, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

James J. Sheehan
President
American Historical Association