

Society for Armenian Studies, Inc.

c/o Armenian Studies Program
5245 N. Backer Ave. M/S PB 4
Fresno, CA 93740-8001



May 24, 2021

To the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Board and Members of
the MESA Committee on Academic Freedom:

Society for Armenian Studies
Executive Council

President

Bedross Der Matossian

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Dzovinar Derderian

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Nora Lessersohn

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JSAS Editor

We, the Executive Council of the Society for Armenian Studies (SAS), would like to commend you for your courageous “MESA Board Statement in Support of Palestinians,” released on May 21, 2021. As the premier scholarly association for the study of the Middle East, your clear and ethical statement in support of Palestinian lives and the Palestinian right to self-determination, education and academic freedom carries significant ethical weight. Rather than the “both-sides” approach that could easily have been taken by an academic association whose members do in fact study the people, organizations, and geographic areas relevant to the conflict, you chose to articulate clear support. With an important and historic Armenian community in the city of Jerusalem and portions of Israel and Palestine, Armenians are intimately connected to the current conflict. The Executive Council of the SAS likewise voices unambiguous support for the Palestinian right to self-determination and academic freedom.

In spite of our support, we cannot help but voice our disappointment with MESA’s idleness when the Armenians of Artsakh were under attack by the Republic of Azerbaijan with the support of Turkey (September-November 2020), with churches destroyed, cultural centers bombed, and civilians killed by the hundreds. The human and material toll of this aggression was met with deafening silence from most intervening countries, mainstream press, global organizations, and academic institutions. The SAS as a partner organization, asked MESA to issue a statement condemning the Azeri invasion and the killing of civilians. The response we received on October 11, 2020 was that “MESA’s Board of Directors does not issue statements on the politics of any conflict that do not pertain to issues of academic freedom or the preservation of cultural heritage.” We then presented specific cases that explicitly pertained to cultural destruction, education, and academic freedom. Nonetheless, no support from MESA was forthcoming. Therefore, we were surprised and shocked to see the recent statement from the MESA Board in support of Palestinians. From the perspective of cultural heritage destruction and academic freedom, the two conflicts bear a distinct similarity as scholars of the field have aptly pointed

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out. It appears to us, then, that releasing a statement in support of Palestinians but not Armenians is a clear case of double standards demonstrating a lack of academic integrity and a dismissal of the SAS's call for action. Therefore, on behalf of the SAS membership we would like to receive a clear response regarding the standards by which MESA chooses to engage with certain conflicts and to disregard others occurring almost at similar times.

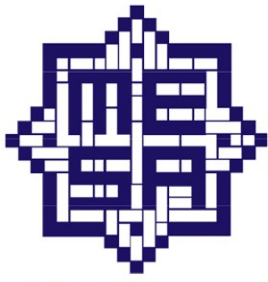
We anticipate that the Middle East Studies Association will resolve this issue.

Executive Council of the Society for Armenian Studies (SAS)

Regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'BDM', enclosed in a light blue rectangular box.

Prof. Bedross Der Matossian
President of the Society for Armenian Studies (SAS)



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Studies
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8 June 2021

Dear Members of the Executive Council of the Society for Armenian Studies,

Thank you for your letter dated 24 May 2021 in which you express your disappointment that MESA's Board did not issue a statement regarding the conflict in Artsakh in fall 2020 and request that we clarify our policy with respect to issuing statements about conflicts. MESA's board members have since deliberated on the matter and hope that this letter provides clarification of our policies on issuing statements.

In general, MESA's board statements build upon its own Committee on Academic Freedom's (CAF) work. Since it was established in 1990, CAF has been documenting and decrying violations of the right to education and academic freedom across the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in North America through its letters. Board statements tend to rely upon CAF's strong track record of highlighting such grievances. During the last thirty years, CAF has issued 98 intervention letters addressing the Israeli government's attacks on the academic freedom of Palestinians and their right to education; it has also issued 11 letters to the Palestinian Authority regarding its violations. You can find CAF letters and Board statements issued since 1990 on the advocacy section of the MESA website.

In addition, as a North American academic organization of Middle East studies, we are committed to holding U.S. and Canadian institutions accountable for their violations of academic freedom. For example, CAF issued letters objecting to the direct involvement of U.S. institutions in the unauthorized removal of archival documents from northern Iraq and their clandestine transfer to the United States. Moreover, CAF issued several letters documenting efforts on college campuses to silence scholarship and censor curricula that are critical of Israeli government's policies toward Palestinians and supportive of the Palestinian struggle. Our most recent Board statement, which prompted the Society of Armenian Studies' letter, builds on CAF's letters as it condemns the systemic violations of the Palestinians' rights to education and academic freedom, efforts to silence critical voices about those persistent violations, as well as the support extended by the U.S. and the Canadian governments to both the government of Israel and the censoring of scholarship exposing Israel's violations.

The Board does not issue statements on intra-regional conflicts in which the United States and/or Canada do not play a significant role through the provision of funding, military hardware, or troop deployment. Even in the cases in which it does intervene, the focus of its statements is on systemic violations of academic freedom and the right to education, as when it

issued statements, in 2004 and 2006, on the dangers to academic life in Iraq in the wake of the U.S. invasion and occupation. Our decision to not issue a statement regarding the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia was related to the Board's practices outlined above.

Please note that MESA has consistently advocated for the open and free discussion of the Armenian genocide and has supported vigorous scholarship on Armenian history in its publications and at its annual meetings. As part of the considerable attention paid by MESA over the years to violations of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas in Turkey, CAF has repeatedly addressed the Turkish government's efforts to suppress studies of the 1915 Armenian genocide. Its letters have highlighted the Turkish government's targeting of scholars who study and write about the genocide as part of its goal to both suppress such scholarship altogether and impose genocide denial throughout its system of education. MESA's advocacy, however, is not limited to CAF letters or Board statements. Our organization has different awards and platform through which it recognizes and supports critical scholarship. In the case of Armenian studies, MESA's Academic Freedom and Book Award recipients include scholars who have written on the Armenian genocide and who have advocated for breaking away from Turkey's denialist policies. Details of these letters and awards can be found on our website.

MESA is therefore committed to promoting robust scholarship on the history and politics of the region including that of Artsakh. In that spirit, we would be happy to host a special session on Artsakh at MESA's upcoming annual meeting, if the Society of Armenian Studies is interested in organizing one.

Sincerely,

Dina Rizk Khoury, MESA President, and MESA's Board of Directors

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June 23, 2021

Dear Prof. Khoury and Members of the MESA Board,

We would like to thank you for your June 8 response to our May 24, 2021 letter. We welcome your offer to organize a special panel/session on Artsakh at MESA's upcoming annual meeting to be held in Montreal.

We would also like to respond to some points of your letter with which we have serious objections.

1. It is surprising to see that your letter automatically equates our request with issues related to the Armenian Genocide, even though our concerns were specific to the war and occupation of Artsakh during the fall of 2020. As a professional and scholarly organization, it is not our policy to raise the subject of the Armenian Genocide at every step. In order to avoid this conflation in the future, please be reminded that the Society for Armenian Studies (SAS) does have a number of genocide scholars in its ranks and deals with this subject in various capacities, but our scholarly activities encompass several thousand years of Armenian history and are not limited to the single issue of the Genocide or the history of the last century. Our attempts to raise awareness about the war in Artsakh should also not, by any means, be dismissed with a blanket statement about the Armenian Genocide. While we acknowledge that MESA has taken some measures to address the denial of the Armenian Genocide and correct its own record in the matter, by conflating the Genocide with the conflict in Artsakh your letter assumes that MESA's response to one historic injustice should be taken as a token of appreciation that absolves it of real engagement with the contemporary conflict of Artsakh. Indeed, MESA's engagement with the Palestinian struggle does not begin and end with the Nakba—nor should it.

2. From our perspective, the MESA Board has established various criteria after the fact of our May 24 letter. Your letter implies that the United States or Canada are disengaged from the Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In this regard, we would like to point out that Section

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907 of the U.S. Freedom Support Act (1992) bans any kind of direct United States aid to the Azerbaijani government due to Azerbaijan's blockade of Armenia during the First Nagorno-Karabakh War, until it is determined that “The Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.” Regardless of this, on April 23, 2021, the Secretary of State extended a waiver of Section 907—as successive U.S. presidents have done—pursuant to the amendment of 2001. This single example belies the MESA precondition of “support extended by the U.S. and the Canadian governments” to make a statement.

3. As we are sending this response, major cultural heritage sites are on the verge of destruction or have already been destroyed as part of a well-documented and consistent policy of Azerbaijan that has encompassed various decades of such activities going back to Soviet times. Among such examples of cultural destruction, other than those perpetrated during the war, we may cite:

- a. February 2021: the destruction of the Kanach Zham (Green Chapel) in Shushi.
- b. March 2021: the destruction of the Armenian Holy Mother of God church near Jebrail, as documented by BBC correspondent Jonah Fisher.
- c. May 2021: Azerbaijan is currently dismantling the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi under the pretext of “renovation,” in an ongoing and overt effort to erase all Armenian characteristics from the iconic church. The church was first targeted in two separate bombing attacks on October 8, 2020. For more information please check: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/agulis>.

4. We would also like to point out that the right to education of Armenians in Artsakh as well as academics were also violated during the war. As a result of the October 2020 war, schools were closed and children as well as university students were deprived of their education for months. Human Rights Watch reported that “Azerbaijan forces struck four times the area near School Number 10, which is across the street from the main electrical substation. The attacks seriously damaged dozens of classrooms, the building’s exterior, and the school’s electrical and water supply.” This particular school had 1300 students, who were all deprived

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of education for months due to Azerbaijan's attacks. This is just one example. Throughout the war 24,000 students remained deprived of education as 217 schools were closed, and an additional 4,000 students were deprived of the 60 kindergartens that served them. Overall, 71 schools and 12 kindergartens were damaged in Artsakh due to Azerbaijani bombardments of these sites. Scholars have also been targeted by Azerbaijan. Among those killed was 46-year-old Dr. Vahram Lalayan, chair of history at the Grigor Narekatsi University of Stepanakert, whose remains were found in his native Mets Tagher village on December 20.

We expect neither an answer nor a statement from MESA on the Artsakh conflict, despite the additional evidence provided above that the conflict meets MESA's own criteria for issuing such a statement. Given this incongruity, we ask that MESA formulates and clarifies its policy with respect to issuing statements about conflicts for all its membership and affiliated organizations. Our hope is that a clear and transparent policy will help MESA affiliates and members avoid any future misunderstandings and disappointments.

Regards,

The Executive Council of the Society for Armenian Studies (SAS)