



LOS ANGELES CITY COUNCIL PRESIDENT
PAUL KREKORIAN
COUNCILMEMBER, SECOND DISTRICT

October 2, 2023

Carol Folt
Office of the President
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0012

Dear President Folt:

As a USC alumnus, it is difficult to express my outrage in strong enough terms after my university gave a platform to representatives of two genocidal nations last Friday – at the very moment that their genocidal actions are killing and displacing over 100,000 of my Armenian brothers and sisters in their ancient ancestral homeland. Promoting genocide perpetrators and deniers on our campus is not an act of intellectual freedom – it is an attack on truth and justice, and it can never be tolerated.

I am writing to provide you with a degree of context so that you can better appreciate my personal revulsion, and that of the entire Armenian community, including so many of USC's students, faculty, staff and alumni. It is my sincere hope that after considering my thoughts, you will meet with me to discuss remedies and solutions going forward as soon as possible.

The Armenians of Artsakh are the indigenous people who have lived and flourished in the region for millenia. They have maintained their language and culture and national identity through centuries of oppression by foreign empires and conquerors. They courageously declared their independence from the USSR and the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan in September 1991 and fought a war against Azerbaijan to preserve it. For almost 30 years, the Republic of Artsakh was a free and democratic state living in peace, despite constant jingoistic threats and sporadic military actions by the surrounding tyrannical dictatorship of Azerbaijan.

Ilham Aliyev, whose personal representative USC hosted on campus last week, is the absolute despot of Azerbaijan. He is a hereditary dictator who is one of the most corrupt, tyrannical and oppressive state leaders in the world.¹ In 2020, using advanced Turkish weapons, Aliyev launched an unprovoked, brutal, full-scale military invasion that conquered much of Artsakh, committing well-documented atrocities against civilians and war crimes in the process, and

¹ <https://www.occrp.org/en/poy/2012/> (US diplomats compare Aliyev to an organized crime boss); <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/azerbaijan%E2%80%99s-aliyev-strategic-liability-not-asset-195170> (“Azerbaijan is among the world’s most corrupt countries”); <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores?sort=desc&order=Total%20Score%20and%20Status> (Azerbaijan ranks 18th out of the world’s 210 countries for oppression of freedoms – slightly better than North Korea, but far worse than China, Russia, Iran, Sudan and Venezuela); <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17047325> (“Dissenting voices are practically absent from mainstream media and critical journalists risk arrest and imprisonment”).

leaving over 5,000 people dead.² Turkey applauded the attack and celebrated its result, reiterating that Turkey and Azerbaijan are “one nation, two states.”³

In violation of the ceasefire agreement, in 2022, Aliyev completely blockaded and isolated the remaining Armenian population of Artsakh, denying civilians access to food, medicine and energy and preventing anyone from getting in or out. Belligerently ignoring international outrage and international law, he maintained the blockade for over nine months, literally attempting to starve the Armenian population into submission.⁴ He was again loudly supported in this crime by Turkey. For Armenians around the world, the echoes of 1915 were unmistakable. The Lemkin Institute for the Prevention of Genocide even issued a “red flag alert for genocide” on June 22, 2023, warning the world about the imminent risk of genocide caused by the blockade.⁵

Two months ago, while the Annenberg School was busily planning its conference on campus, the former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Luis Moreno Ocampo, published a comprehensive report about the humanitarian catastrophe that Aliyev had intentionally created.⁶ The report concluded that “there is a reasonable basis to believe that a genocide is being committed” by Aliyev in Artsakh, noting that the United Nations defines genocide as including “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction.” The UN Security Council even convened an emergency meeting to address Aliyev’s ongoing acts of genocide, but the expansionist dictator continued to ignore all international condemnation and fundamental principles of human rights, and Turkey continued to support him.⁷

Two weeks ago, as civilians of Artsakh were suffering and dying from malnutrition and lack of medical care, Azerbaijan launched another savage military attack against them. Azeri troops slaughtered civilians in their villages. Some of them wore patches bearing the image of Enver Pasha, the Turkish architect of the Armenian Genocide, with a mocking inscription that read “Armenians, don’t run – you will only die exhausted.”⁸ Social media has been replete with postings by Azeri soldiers proudly beheading civilians, cutting the ears off of corpses, beating and humiliating prisoners, and desecrating graves and churches.⁹

As a result, the Armenian people of Artsakh, who had earned their right to self-determination and sovereignty and had maintained successful democratic governance for three decades, have now been subjugated by Aliyev. They found themselves under the control of an Azeri

² <https://eurasianet.org/evidence-of-widespread-atrocities-emerges-following-karabakh-war>

³ <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20201210-one-nation-two-states-on-display-as-erdogan-visits-azerbaijan-for-karabakh-victory-parade>

⁴ <https://www.politico.eu/article/united-nations-security-council-discuss-nagorno-karabakh-crisis-genocide-warning/>

⁵ <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/red-flag-alerts/red-flag-alert-for-genocide---azerbaijan---update-%238>

⁶ <https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/armenians-face-genocide-azerbaijan-former-international-criminal-court-prosecutor-warns>

⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/karabakh-blockade-un-emergency-meeting-armenia-azerbaijan/32550909.html>

⁸ <https://news.am/eng/news/784374.html>

⁹ <https://www.lemkininstitute.com/single-post/graphic-execution-videos-emerge-as-armenians-flee-and-experts-warn-of-genocide>

government that has frequently promised (and actively attempted) to destroy them and entirely erase the ancient indigenous Armenian presence in the region. True to his dictatorial instincts, Aliyev has forced the Artsakh Armenians to dissolve their democratic government, and Azerbaijan has arrested and imprisoned the civilian leaders of Artsakh, including its former State Minister and its former Foreign Minister.¹⁰

With still-fresh memory of repeated Azeri massacres of Armenian men, women and children (including the mass murder and rape that Azeris committed at Sumgait, Kirovabad, Baku, Maraga, Shushi, Martakert and Hadrut), the vulnerable Armenian civilians had no choice but to flee their ancestral lands. Over the course of the last two weeks, and including last Friday while USC was hosting its conference on Turkish “diplomacy,” 100,000 Armenian civilians have been evacuating Artsakh, leaving behind everything they own, their homes, their businesses, their farms, their schools, their churches, and the graves of generations of their ancestors.

Aliyev’s genocidal strategy of murder and ethnic cleansing is virtually complete, yet the world is standing idly by as it occurs. Nations around the world continue to assert the phrase “Never Again!” piously, but the outrageous hypocrisy of those empty words without action is mind-numbing as we watch genocide occur again and again.

And in the midst of this moment in history, USC promoted an event that allowed the representatives of the Azeri and Turkish dictators to deny the genocide of Armenians even as that genocide was occurring. USC gave voice to these dictators to speak about “diplomacy” at the very moment they were engaged in the absolute opposite of diplomacy.

The Armenian community here in Los Angeles and around the world is understandably stunned and disgusted by USC’s decision to move forward with this horrendous event, especially at this time. I for one cannot believe that the timing of an event like this featuring government officials of Turkey and Azerbaijan was merely a coincidence. I have enough personal experience dealing with the well-oiled Turkish/Azeri propaganda machine to recognize their whitewashing when I see it. Unfortunately, it appears that they succeeded in using USC as just another propaganda tool.¹¹ It is now incumbent on the University to determine how that could have happened, and how it can make amends.

I have read the cursory response of USC’s Provost and Senior Vice President, Andrew Guzman, to the California Armenian Legislative Caucus regarding this event. Frankly, it only adds insult to injury. Incredibly, the Provost’s letter implies that this conference was an event that had been organized by students, where students and others may be exchanging ideas that, even if controversial, should be protected by notions of academic freedom. This is a baffling assertion, since dictator Erdogan’s far-right political party tweeted that the USC program was

¹⁰ <https://asbarez.com/former-artsakh-foreign-minister-in-azerbaijani-custody/>

¹¹ And they continue to use USC as a propaganda tool now, in Turkish media, accusing Armenian protestors of being radical criminals, and applauding your administration for remaining “resolute” in your commitment to this event.
<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkiye-concerned-after-armenian-group-attacks-turkish-event-in-us/news?fbclid=IwAR0DF3XETGljX2dm4X8otyXk4-Zn4dfHR-9gtfOEj8Q6-XtaFZTeZxq2w4>

“organized by **our** Yunus Emre Institute in Los Angeles, where **our** Ambassador to Washington, Murat Mercan, was also a participant.” In any event, there is a fundamental difference between giving students the opportunity to speak freely about controversies and giving foreign governments a platform and the University’s imprimatur to advance their genocidal policies and historical revisionism.

I believe that you are committed to the University’s academic integrity, and I hope that you are concerned about the very real impact that this event has had on USC’s reputation. In an effort to address those concerns directly, I request that you conduct a thorough investigation to determine the answers to the following questions, and I further request that you meet with me and other leaders of the Armenian-American community as soon as possible to discuss them:

1. How and when did the Annenberg School initiate the planning of this event, and why was the event scheduled for this date?
2. What communication did the Annenberg School have with representatives of the governments of Turkey and Azerbaijan in planning this event, including their foreign ministries and their local consulates?
3. What involvement, if any, did representatives of the United States Department of State or any other US federal agency have in planning or facilitating this event?
4. Was there any discussion within the University, or between the University and Turkish or Azeri authorities, about canceling or postponing the event due to the circumstances?
5. The Yunus Emre Institute was created by Turkish dictator Recep Erdogan and was a sponsor of the event. How much did they pay USC to sponsor the event? Who else paid expenses for this event, and did any funding come directly or indirectly from foreign governments or entities working on their behalf beside the Yunus Emre Institute?
6. Did USC coordinate security with the Turkish or Azerbaijani governments? Were any Turkish or Azerbaijani security personnel present at the event?
7. Were the Annenberg School or other USC representatives provided with, and did they have any input about, agendas or outlines of what would be presented by Turkish or Azeri government officials?
8. Although this event was marketed as being about Turkey and not Azerbaijan, did any representative of USC know that the Consul General of Azerbaijan would participate in the event at the very moment his government was committing genocide?
9. Has there been any discussion between the administration of USC and the government of Turkey or Azerbaijan or their representatives (or any foundation or other entity that serves their interests) about the potential creation of a Turkish Chair, a Center for Turkish Studies, or any similar academic platform for the Turkish or Azerbaijani governments or their agenda?
10. What is the University’s relationship with the Yunus Emre Institute? Has that institute, or any other organization created by the Turkish government, had any discussions or made any agreements with the University for future funding or future events?
11. During USC’s Spring Break this year, 15 Annenberg Public Diplomacy students traveled to Turkey as guests of the Yunus Emre Institute. Did any faculty or administrators accompany them as sponsored guests? Have any of the USC organizers of the Turkish diplomacy conference last Friday received sponsored trips to Turkey, grant funding,

scholarships, or any other personal benefits from the Yunus Emre Institute or any other entity created by the Turkish government?

I look forward to your response, and to meeting with you to discuss next steps. At minimum, I believe the University must provide full transparency and appropriate accountability relating to this event and its relationships with Turkey and Azerbaijan. More fundamentally, especially in the wake of this fiasco, I hope and expect that my university will find every way possible to stand up for democracy and against dictatorial oppression; to promote truth and reject false propaganda and historical revisionism; and to demonstrate a commitment to human rights and social justice by bringing comfort and relief to the suffering Armenians of Artsakh.

Very truly yours,



Paul Krekorian
President, Los Angeles City Council

cc: Andrew T. Guzman, USC Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Willow Bay, Dean, USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism
Suzanne M. Nora Johnson, Chairperson, USC Board of Trustees