

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

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**MESA '08**  
November 22-25  
Washington, DC

June 9, 2008

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

via fax: 202-647-2283

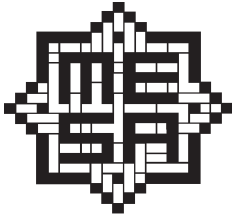
Dear Secretary Rice:

I write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern regarding the State Department's failure to respond in a timely fashion to the visa request of Professor Mahmoud Abossowa of Fatah University in Tripoli, Libya. As a result, Professor Abossowa was unable to attend a conference to which he had been invited at Harvard University, 16-18 May 2008.

The Middle East Studies Association of North American (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 more than 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.

Professor Abossowa was invited by the Islamic Legal Studies Program of Harvard University Law School, Cambridge, Massachusetts to participate in an international conference on Waqf (pious endowments). Despite applying for his visa using the online visa request form in December 2007, well in advance of the May 2008 conference, and despite traveling from Tripoli, Libya to Tunis, Tunisia, for an interview with U.S. consular officials on 11 April 2008, no decision was made on his visa. Telephone calls and letters from Harvard's Islamic Legal Studies Program also failed to elicit a decision. The result was the regrettable absence of Prof. Abossowa from this international conference.

MESA is committed to fostering the free exchange of knowledge as a human right and to inhibit infringements on that right by government restrictions on scholars. The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provide the principal standards by which human rights violations are identified today. Those rights include the right to education and work, freedom of movement and residence, and freedom of association and assembly. Infringements include governmental refusal to allow scholars to conduct scholarly research, publish their findings, deliver academic lectures, and travel to international scholarly meetings. We believe that the failure to respond to the visa requests of academics—treatment which effectively constitutes a denial of the visa—represents just such an infringement.



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Had the failure of the State Department to respond to Prof. Abossowa's visa request been an isolated incident, we would still have voiced our concern. Unfortunately, however, the treatment suffered by Prof. Abossowa is not unique, but rather an experience to which numerous Arab and/or Muslim scholars and students have been subject in recent years. Such treatment is profoundly counter-productive to the stated aims of our national policy. If the United States truly seeks a better understanding of and relationship with the Arab/Muslim world, it must be open to receiving and hosting a range of scholars from the region.

We urge you to look into the State Department's failure to respond in the case of Prof. Abossowa. More generally, we ask that you review a process of visa application and processing which has been shown repeatedly in recent years seriously and negatively to interfere with the higher education community's capacity to fulfill our core mission and which represents a serious threat to academic freedom.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Mervat F. Hatem  
MESA President  
Professor of Political Science, Howard University

cc: Ambassador Robert F. Godec  
Consul Sean Cooper