

**Middle
East
Studies
Association**

of North America, Inc.

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7 July 2011

Your Excellency Dr. Majid bin Ali Al-Naimi
Minister of Education of the Kingdom of Bahrain and
Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the University of Bahrain

Dear Dr. Al-Naimi,

I write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our continuing concern over an unprecedented number of assaults, arrests, dismissals, and punishments affecting faculty, students, and staff from several educational institutions in Bahrain as well as numerous Bahraini students studying abroad.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching of the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 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.

In our letter of April 21 we expressed serious concerns regarding the arrest of Professor Masoud Jahromi; the many student, faculty and staff dismissals from the University of Bahrain; the firing of 111 civil servants in the education sector; and the revocation of scholarships from students studying in the UK. Since then, the violations of academic freedom in Bahrain have continued. Indeed, evidence suggests that they have increased. As educators concerned not only with academic freedom but also with basic human rights, we are compelled to write again.

To rehearse the list, even of only the most fully substantiated violations, would consume pages. Hence, we draw attention here, in a brief summary, to the multiple abuses at the university level:

1. The whereabouts and condition of Professor Jahromi remain unknown.
2. Over 600 students have been expelled from Bahraini universities, including many academically outstanding students.
3. More than 78 students have been arrested. Many remain in jail.
4. The homes of other students have been violated and ransacked, and their families have been threatened.
5. Ten students studying in Auckland University, New Zealand have recently reported having their scholarships revoked.

As egregious as these actions are, we are particularly disturbed by the recently announced requirement that students sign loyalty oaths. The implicit suggestion made by Ministry of Education spokesperson Lubna Selaibeekh (www.moe.gov.bh) that students owe their loyalty to a particular government in exchange for their education is contrary to the universal mission shared by educators worldwide: the pursuit of knowledge to nurture young citizens capable of critical thinking and nation building. Indeed, the Universal Declaration for Human Rights states, *“Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and*

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shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace” - Article 26 (B).

In a further indication of the deterioration of the academic environment, specifically at the University of Bahrain, Vice President Yousif Al-Bastaki affirmed in Al Wasat that the university has taken a series of measures to strengthen security. Hundreds of surveillance cameras have been installed across campus, buildings have been surrounded with barbed wire, and checkpoints have apparently been set up targeting and humiliating certain students. Any one of these measures would have a deleterious effect on the day-to-day rhythm of student and faculty interactions and discourse. Taken together, however, they constitute a stifling environment, hostile to any serious academic inquiry or learning.

Moreover, for university officials to suggest that students who choose not to continue to matriculate in such an environment can simply transfer elsewhere is particularly problematic given the substantial evidence indicating that over 600 university students have not only been expelled, but have also been denied their transcripts. With no access to these documents, they are effectively barred from resuming their education anywhere else.

Regarding faculty and staff, both the multiple investigations into their activities, undertaken apparently by three-member Commissions of Inquiry formed for this purpose, and the disciplinary boards that have sanctioned faculty are also extremely troubling. New regulations reported on June 7 stipulate that academics are not allowed to participate in any political activity inside or outside of the university environs. Anything deemed damaging to the reputation and prestige of the Bahraini state, the academic community, or Bahraini society in general is considered liable to prosecution. Such limitations on the activity of faculty are sweeping and ambiguous and hence open the way to arbitrary implementation by state authorities.

Nor is the growing litany of violations of academic freedom limited to the campus of the University of Bahrain. It has been reported that more than 60 students have been expelled from Bahrain Polytechnic. We have also received credible reports of professors from another institution having been blindfolded, handcuffed, interrogated, lined up against the wall and subjected to barrages of verbal insults as well as physical assaults at a police station. The Bahrain Teacher's Society was summarily dissolved by the government. Bahraini students studying in the UK were forced to sign a pledge of loyalty to the ruling family or face losing their scholarships. Further, on July 1, MSNBC reported that the government has asked Bahraini students abroad to spy on their fellow citizens and report back to the government. Multiple sources report that Bahraini students pursuing education in the United States have been pressured to attend pro-government rallies.

Finally, and just as disturbing, these egregious violations of academic freedom have extended below the post-secondary level: similar reports of intimidation and dismissals have been reported at the elementary and secondary levels as well. Taken together, these violations and abuses paint a dreadful picture of a severely compromised educational sector, one which intimidates and demeans students and faculty alike and which can in no way fulfill its pedagogical mission.

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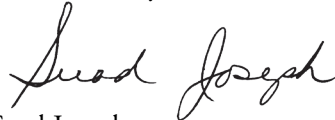
Article 7 of the Bahraini Constitution states, "The State guarantees the inviolability of the places of learning." We therefore respectfully request that you reexamine the cases of all those who have been arrested, fired, or expelled. If legitimate cause exists for such action, it should be conveyed to each individual through formal channels. If not, we urge you to respect the fundamentals of academic freedom and to reinstate all the students, faculty, civil servants and administrators who have been unjustly dismissed. We also ask again that you address the arrest of Professor Jahromi according to recognized international legal standards.

We further urge that you revoke the requirement that students, whether within the kingdom or abroad, sign loyalty oaths and that you lift the wide-ranging limitations on activities of faculty and staff related to freedom of speech and conscience both on and off campus.

In sum, we ask, in keeping with the commitment in Article 7 of the Bahraini Constitution, that you allow Bahrain's universities, its elementary and secondary schools, and other educational training institutes once again to serve the kingdom and its future as "inviolable places of learning."

We look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely,



Suad Joseph
MESA President
Professor of Anthropology and Women's Studies
University of California Davis

cc:

Dr. Ebrahim Mohammed Janahi, President of the University of Bahrain
Dr. Abdullah Yousif Al-Hawaj, President of Ahlia University
Her Excellency Houda Ezra Ebrahim Nonoo, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the United States
His Excellency Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ali Al-Khalifah, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the United Kingdom
Dr. Yousif Al-Bastaki, Vice President for Administrative Affairs, Finance and Information Technology of the University of Bahrain
Prof. M. Cherif Bassiouni, Distinguished Research Professor of Law, De Paul University School of Law