

**Middle
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Studies
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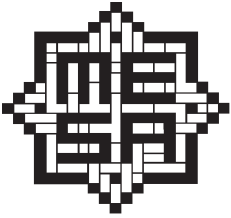
Your Excellency:

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America to protest the 9 March 2008 attack by special forces police against a lawful meeting of a student-organized seminar at Shiraz University, as well as the ongoing harassment of students by university officials.

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 2700 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.

The seminar at Shiraz University was sponsored by the Islamic Students Association, which applied for and received a permit to hold the event. Speakers from outside were invited. According to eyewitness reports, special forces police took over the seminar hall. Some blocked the speakers and would-be attendees from entering while others beat the student organizers. Six students were arrested and, when two other students inquired about their status, they also were arrested. Seven other students were detained at demonstrations before and after this event.

The police attack on the seminar appears to be an attempt to crush student protests at Shiraz University more generally. Actions by local law enforcement agents occurred in tandem with similar university actions. Students have demonstrated in favor of hiring qualified faculty, holding new elections for the Student Council, and improving living conditions in women's dormitories. Prior to the seminar's disruption, university officials had engaged in months of harassment of students that included interference in student elections: in December 2007, university administrators disqualified 108 students running for election to the Student Council. Student demonstrators were roughly treated by university security guards and, according to an eyewitness, at least one female demonstrator was beaten. Witnesses also reported harassment of students' families by intelligence officials. The editors of four student publications were prosecuted in the local court for printing "propaganda against the system." The students responded to these repressive measures with a series of sit-ins and with calls for the resignation of the university chancellor, Mohammad Hadi Sadeghi. According to our information, as many as 3000 students participated at various times in the sit-ins, which also were supported by members of the university faculty and staff, and which were due to culminate the day after the seminar was attacked.



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page 2/1 April 2008 re: student arrests and harassment

Although all the students who were detained are reported to be free on bail, most say they were beaten during their incarceration; and seminar organizers report having been kept in solitary confinement. After the campus was closed for the Norouz holiday, we learned that the university's disciplinary committee suspended ten of them for up to two semesters. Four were punished for having participated in demonstrations in December, and the other six for their participation in the sit-ins.

Assaults on student assemblies and the disruption of lawful university events by university and police officials constitute a severe abuse of academic freedom. We ask that you investigate the repression of, and violence committed against, students at Shiraz University by the leaders of their institution and by the local officials who have cooperated with university administrators in beating, incarcerating, and judicially pursuing students for exercising their rights of free speech and lawful assembly. We also urge you to support our request that the university administration respond to students' reasonable demands that their elections be permitted to go on without interference and that their living and learning conditions be brought up to acceptable standards. We look forward to hearing from you with regard to the actions you take in this regard.

Sincerely,

Mervat F. Hatem
MESA President