



Middle East Studies Association of North America, Inc.

The University of Arizona • 1643 E. Helen Street • Tucson AZ 85721

16 June 1998

His Excellency Hosni Mubarak
President of the Arab Republic of Egypt
c/o Excellency Ahmed Maher El Sayed
Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt
3521 International Court, NW
Washington, DC 20008

Your Excellency:

Freedom of expression and the unencumbered pursuit of knowledge are the cornerstones of academe. In today's world only those faculty who are left free to teach and conduct scholarship are capable of serving their students and offer science and progress to their nations. Perhaps nothing disturbs academics more than political pressure limiting the scope of academic inquiry. Especially detestable is the banishing of academic books.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and is committed to ensuring respect for principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

According to recent reports, a lecturer at the American University in Cairo assigned to his class the book *Muhammad*, a classic text by the internationally renowned scholar, Maxime Rodinson. This book has been a standard university-level text in Middle Eastern studies throughout the French and English speaking world for the last twenty-five years. At AUC it was assigned for a critical book review along with several other books on the same topic. A student named Fadi Masri circulated a petition criticizing the use of the book. To make his point, he quoted out of context certain passages from the book. Then, a journalist named Salah Muntasser published an article in the 13 May 1998 issue of *al-Ahram*, stating that the book contained passages that insult Islamic beliefs and ridicule the Holy Book. President Hosni Mubarak gave an order, through the Minister of Higher Education, to the American University in Cairo to prohibit the use of Maxime Rodinson's book.

The American University in Cairo noted that the book has been available in Egypt and used by the university's students since its publication in the early 1970s. AUC Dean Cynthia Nelson drafted a letter responding to the order, but *al-Ahram* refused to print it. In response to the President's order, the University felt compelled to inform professors that they could no longer include the book in their reading lists. Likewise, librarians were ordered to remove it from the library and the bookstore to cease selling it to students. All this was done on the extremely tenuous ground that it had been "deemed insulting to Islam's Prophet Muhammad." The presidential decree violates the most basic tenets of academic freedom.

Rodinson's *Muhammad* is a respected text among the international community of scholars. It is totally unacceptable to us, as it is to academics in every discipline around the world, that a university should receive a presidential decree ordering it not to use a book written by an academic scholar. That judgment should be left to academics themselves. The issuance of such a decree is blatant political interference that bodes ill for any institution of higher learning. From the second half of the nineteenth century, Egypt flourished culturally and intellectually mostly during the periods when it tolerated varying political and intellectual viewpoints. Indeed this tolerance has been its greatest source of strength, contributing greatly to the enrichment of its culture. It is unthinkable that Egypt could be entering into a period of academic censorship that would impoverish its intellectual heritage and violate international standards of academic freedom and human rights.

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We urge the President of the Republic to let universities carry on their mission of higher education without political interference. We urge *al-Ahram* to print Dean Nelson's rebuttal. We urge the university to return the book to its course lists, to the library, and bookstore. Finally we urge the Ministry of Education to allow the free flow of ideas and the uncensored circulation of scholarly texts.

Respectfully,



Anne H. Betteridge
Executive Director

cc: His Excellency Farouq Sayf al-Nasr, Minister of Justice
His Excellency Dr. Hussein Kamel Baha'eddin, Minister of Education
Chancellor Dr. Mufid Shehab, Cairo University
Ms. Naela Gabr, Human Rights Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
His Excellency Muhammad C. Chabane, Permanent Representative of Egypt to the European Union
His Excellency Mohamed Shaker, Ambassador, London, England
U.S. Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck, Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs
The Honorable Edward Walker, Jr., U.S. Ambassador, Cairo, Egypt
Dr. Cynthia Nelson, Dean, American University in Cairo
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