

November 30, 2005

His Excellency Husni Mubarak  
President of the Arab Republic of Egypt  
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Cairo, Egypt  
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Your Excellency:

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association to protest the banning in Egypt of a book published by the American University in Cairo Press, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* by Natana J. DeLong-Bas for Egyptian scholarly audiences.

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 2600 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.

From reports in the press and other sources, we understand the situation to be as follows: *Wahhabi Islam* was originally co-published in 2004 by Oxford University Press in the United States and I.B. Tauris in the United Kingdom. This year the American University in Cairo (AUC) Press agreed to publish it in Cairo in order to make it more accessible to Egyptian scholarly audiences.

According to our information, on October 8, 2005, the AUC Press was informed that copies of the book which had arrived at Port Said would not be allowed to enter Egypt because it contained "information not in accordance with the principles of Islam and cannot be published in the Arab Republic of Egypt in this form." The Press thereupon requested from Al Azhar Academy of Islamic Research a copy of the report specifying what parts of the book were judged objectionable. This was requested in writing three times, but no response whatsoever has been received.

The Middle East Studies Association and its Committee on Academic Freedom of course take no position on the contents of this or any other book. It is the principle of academic freedom and the rights of citizens generally to free expression and to receive and impart information which is at stake here.

These rights are guaranteed under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Egypt is a state party, and can be restricted only for sound reasons of national security, public order, or public health and morals. The banning of this book, particularly in the university setting of an academic press, clearly exceeds these permissible grounds for restriction. Furthermore, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Egypt is a party, states in its preamble that member states pledge

themselves “that every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.”

DeLong-Bas’s *Wahhabi Islam* is being widely discussed by Muslim and other scholars around the world who look to al-Azhar and Egypt as respected centers of Islamic learning and intellectual leadership. It would be deplorable if a ban on the book makes it impossible for Egyptian citizens to contribute constructively to this discussion. This would be particularly unfortunate at a time when democratization is under lively discussion within Egypt and your government has committed itself to significant steps in that direction.

Book-banning and similar acts of official censorship help to sustain a climate of intolerance that is debilitating to society in general and to intellectual life in particular. We ask you to take steps now to end official and state-sanctioned book-banning in Egypt, and thereby to affirm publicly your government’s commitment to the rights of free expression and the free flow of ideas that are fundamental to a civilized society.

Respectfully yours,

Juan R.I. Cole  
MESA President

Cc: Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi  
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