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Dear President al-Sisi, and Members of the Supreme State Security Prosecution,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our concern regarding the arrest and detention on 7 February 2020 of Patrick George Zaki, a student at the University of Bologna, Italy. He has been denied due process and detained with no credible evidence to justify suspicion of guilt.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has over 2,700 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Patrick Zaki, a student and a human rights organizer with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), was awarded an EU-funded Erasmus scholarship to enroll in the prestigious international GEMMA masters programme in Gender Studies at the University of Bologna. [According to multiple reports](#), Zaki was detained at Cairo airport upon his return for a family visit from the University of Bologna on the night of 7 February. He was kept blindfolded and handcuffed for 17 hours of interrogation by the National Security Agency (*Amn al-Dawlah*) officers at the airport, and was then transferred to an undisclosed location in the delta city of Mansoura. There, during additional questioning about his human rights work and the purpose of his time in Italy, he was threatened, beaten on his stomach and back, and tortured with electric shocks.

The next day, Mr. Zaki appeared before the public prosecutor in Mansoura, and was charged with: spreading false news and statements to disturb the peace; inciting protest without permission from relevant authorities in order to undermine state institutions, overthrow the Egyptian government and instigate terrorism. His detention was renewed on 22 February by the Southern Mansoura prosecutor's office for an additional 15 days for the charge of spreading false news. No evidence has been presented to substantiate any of the accusations against him.



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We have reason to believe that Zaki's detention is punishment for his human rights and academic work. For example, while he has been charged with "spreading false news and data, inciting demonstrations without obtaining a permit, etc.," he was asked, during the initial interrogation session at the Public Prosecutor's office in Mansoura, about both his academic research and human rights activity. He was also shown screen shots of Facebook posts falsely attributed to him as evidence of the charges. Zaki denies this attribution. Moreover, according to Zaki's lawyers, the Arrest Report states that he was arrested at a check-point in Mansoura, when in fact he was arrested at Cairo Airport. Such contradictions -- indeed, misinformation -- do indeed raise concerns about the true motivations behind Zaki's detention and the charges against him. Furthermore, according to several reports in the media, a security source mentioned, soon after his arrest, that Zaki is not an Italian citizen, but Egyptian. While this is indeed true, we fear that such a statement belies a discriminatory security reasoning according to which Egyptian citizens should receive less access to justice (than a European), and can be denied fair treatment while in custody, a basic human right guaranteed under international human rights declarations and the Egyptian Constitution.

As has been the case in detentions of other scholars and students, Patrick Zaki is being denied substantive access to his family and legal representation. Amnesty International has called for his immediate release and for opening "an independent investigation into the torture he has suffered and urgently ensure his protection." David Sassoli, the president of the European Parliament, has also called on your government to release Patrick Zaki.

The actions taken against Patrick Zaki by state security forces violate international norms and human rights. We therefore call upon you to see to the immediate, safe release of Patrick Zaki to his family, ensure that all charges against him are dropped, and open an investigation into the torture he has suffered at the hands of Egyptian security forces. We further urge you to release all other students and scholars currently detained by your government on baseless charges.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Dina Rizk Khoury  
MESA President  
Professor, George Washington University

Laurie Brand  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor, University of Southern California