



**Middle
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November 11, 2002

Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i
Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran
c/o H.E. Javad Zarif
Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
622 Third Avenue, 34th floor
New York, NY 10017

By post and facsimile: 212 867-7086

Your Excellency:

I am writing to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA). We are contacting you to express our very grave concern and strong condemnation regarding the death sentence and other harsh penalties issued against Professor Hashem Aghajari, chair of the history department at Tehran's Tarbiat Modaress University and a visiting professor at the University of Tehran and Beheshti University.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) comprises 2700 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa, and is the preeminent professional association in the field. The association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, and is committed to ensuring respect for the principles of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the region and in connection with the study of the Middle East and North Africa.

According to information we have received, in August Professor Aghajari was arrested and charged with apostasy following a lecture he delivered in the city of Hamedan entitled "Islamic Protestantism." In those remarks he reportedly criticized the political role of Iran's clerical establishment and called for an end to "blind obedience" to decrees by clerical leaders. On November 7, following an unfair trial in the Hamedan District Court that was closed to the public, Judge Ramazani condemned Professor Aghajari to death. The judge also sentenced him to seventy-four lashes and eight years in prison and proclaimed a ten-year ban against his engagement in teaching activities.

We understand that once this ruling is formally conveyed to Professor Aghajari's legal counsel, he will have twenty days in which to appeal the sentence to the Supreme Court.

It is our view that Professor Aghajari is being prosecuted and harshly punished solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression as guaranteed under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Iran, as a state party to this treaty, is obligated to respect and protect the exercise of this right.

In the context of current political developments in Iran, it is apparent that the intent of those who brought these charges and arrived at this judgement is not only to punish Dr. Aghajari, an academic respected in Iran for his courage and integrity, but also to intimidate other academics and public thinkers from speaking out.

We therefore urge you in the strongest terms to speak out publicly and to take all necessary steps to ensure that neither the death penalty nor any of the other punishments decreed against Professor Aghajari are carried out. We ask that you request the head of the Judiciary and other relevant officials to release Professor Aghajari from prison immediately and unconditionally, and lift the ban against his teaching activities.

We also understand that Dr. Aghajari is in urgent need of medical attention regarding an infection that has developed in his right leg which had been amputated at the knee following injuries received in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war. We ask that you take immediate steps to ensure that Dr. Aghajari receives forthwith all necessary medical attention and has access to medical professionals of his own choosing.

Your Excellency, these steps are critical in order to help restore Iran's international standing as a country with a great tradition of learning and scholarly inquiry, and to ensure that Iranian society benefits from the free exchange of ideas. We thank you in advance for your attention to this matter and look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,



Amy W. Newhall
Executive Director

cc: His Excellency Kamal Kharrazi
Minister of Foreign Affairs

His Excellency Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahrudi
Head of the Judiciary