

September 13, 2006

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei
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
Fax: 212-867-7086

Your Excellency,

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America to express our concern over the announcement last week that your government plans to purge liberal and secular faculty members from universities in Iran. We respectfully request assurances from you that any compulsory retirement of academic personnel be done in a transparent manner and without regard to their political views.

We also request assurances about the well-being of Dr. Mohamed Hadi Hadizadeh-Yazdi, a physics professor at Ferdowsi University, whom the authorities detained in May 2006 reportedly on charges of conspiring against the Islamic Republic.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (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.

Our concern regarding the risk of forced retirements on political grounds stems from the University of Tehran's announcement in June 2006 that between 40 and 45 of the faculty members who had reached the mandatory retirement age would be obliged to retire. Abbasali Amid Zanjani, the president of the university, told reporters that the university would decide which among the faculty members who had reached 65, or in some cases 60, would be asked to leave. Several well-known Iranian academics, including a former minister of culture and higher education and a former president of the University of Isfahan, have publicly expressed concern that political considerations will play a role in the threatened dismissals. More recently, in early September, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told a gathering of young scientists that students should "protest and shout about" and demand "why some liberal or secular professors are still present in the universities."

Our concern is heightened by recent government acts that violate the rights of academics to freedom of thought and speech. In May 2006, the authorities arrested Ramin Jahanbegloo, a prominent scholar affiliated with the Iranian Institute of Contemporary Studies, and Mohammad Hadi Hadizadeh-Yazdi, a physics professor at Ferdowsi University in Mashhad. The authorities recently released Professor Jahanbegloo on bail. We understand that the charges against him, reportedly based on the fact that he meets with foreigners in the course of his work, have not been dismissed. We do not know the circumstances or conditions of Professor Hadizadeh-Yazdi's continued detention and we remain concerned about his well-being.

We feel compelled to remind Your Excellency that the rights of individuals to freedom of thought, opinion, and speech are explicitly protected under the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Article 23), as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 18, 19, 21), to which the Islamic Republic of Iran is a state party. Dismissing professors for exercising these rights directly violates these solemn commitments to human rights and academic freedom, and represent an affront to the universal value of free and open exchange of ideas.

For this reason we ask that you ensure that Iran's universities use transparent and non-discriminatory criteria in any decisions regarding compulsory retirement, and that no academics face dismissal solely or mainly because of political views that they express peacefully.

Your Excellency, we trust that you will appreciate the seriousness of this matter and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Juan R.I. Cole
MESA President