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Committee on
Academic Freedom

April 5, 2018

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei
Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran
c/o H.E. Mr. Gholamali Khoshroo
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
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Your Excellency,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our concern regarding the sentencing of Professor Sadegh Zibakalam to 18 months in jail for a recent interview that he gave to Deutsche Welle Persian Service, a broadcasting channel that has been banned in Iran since 2009.

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 nearly 2,500 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.

Dr. Zibakalam, a prominent political analyst and professor of political science at the University of Tehran and Islamic Azad University, gave an interview to Deutsche Welle Persian Service in January 2018. In the interview, he commented on the December 2017 protests against corruption and economic hardship in which tens of thousands took part and during which more than 20 people were killed. In the interview, Dr. Zibakalam highlighted the grassroots component of these protests, in which diverse groups participated and expressed their dissatisfaction with the economic, social, and political conditions in the country.

Because of this interview, Dr. Zibakalam was charged with “spreading propaganda against the establishment and the dissemination of lies against the establishment.”

During your annual Nowruz speech delivered this year, your Excellency stated that there is “freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of choice” in Iran, and that “no one in the Islamic Republic is prosecuted or put under pressure for being opposed to the government in their thoughts or views, and there is no intention of doing so.” As an organization committed to the very freedoms that you recently highlighted and re-affirmed, MESA is shocked that Dr. Zibakalam is being charged under Article 500 of Iran’s criminal code for propaganda-related offenses merely for expressing his views. Furthermore, while the offense of spreading propaganda, if proven in a court of law, should by the terms of Iran’s penal code carry a sentence of between three and 12 months, the Tehran Revolutionary Court delivered a much harsher verdict in Dr. Zibakalam’s case because he is considered a “repeat offender.” (In 2014, he faced charges for a similar crime after he criticized the Islamic Republic’s nuclear policies. The sentence was later commuted to a fine equivalent to US \$1,328.)

Following the recent interview, Dr. Zibakalam has also been banned for two years from political and social activities, including giving public speeches, writing articles, giving interviews and being active in cyberspace.

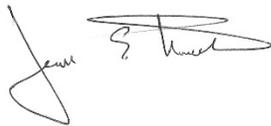
Dr. Zibakalam has 20 days to appeal the new sentence, which he is planning to do.

Dr. Zibakalam's conviction is a violation of Iran's obligations under both its constitution and international law. Freedom of thought, opinion, and speech are explicitly protected under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 18 and 19), to which the Islamic Republic of Iran is a signatory. Further, according to Article 3 (7) of the Iranian constitution, the government is bound to ensure political and social freedom within the domain of the law, and according to Article 9, no authority shall have the right to deprive the people, under the pretext of safeguarding the independence and territorial integrity of the country, of their legitimate freedoms.

The Committee on Academic Freedom strongly objects to the continued violations by the Iranian authorities of internationally and nationally recognized rights and due process in Iran. We urge you to ensure that the judiciary, especially the Revolutionary Courts, function in a manner consistent with Iran's national and international legal obligations.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University



Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director

cc

Mansoor Gholami', Minister of Science, Research and Technology
Mohammad Bathaei, Minister of Education
Ayatollah Sadeqh Larijani, Head of the Judiciary
Hassan Rouhani, President
The Honorable Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights