



**Middle
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30 January 2020

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Your Excellencies, Sirs,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our deep dismay at the recent crackdown on peaceful student protests held across the country following the downing of Ukrainian International Airlines Flight 752 on 8 January 2020.

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.

Following the 11 January 2020 admission by the Supreme Command of Iran's Revolutionary Guards that they had mistakenly shot down Ukrainian International Airlines Flight 752, students across Iran gathered at vigils to honour the memory of the 176 people killed in the crash. Students also assembled to protest the fact that for

three days the state's security services had vehemently denied any involvement in the plane crash, and had begun to remove crucial evidence from the crash site.

Daily campus protests took place beginning 11 January 2020 at universities in Tehran and Karaj, at the University of Arak, the University of Isfahan, the Fine Arts University in Isfahan, Noshirvani University in Babol, Razi University in Kermanshah, and the University of Mohaghegh Ardabili in Ardabil Province.

In response, on 14 January 2020, security personnel began a crackdown. At the University of Isfahan, eight student activists received threatening phone calls from the university's security office demanding that the protests be cancelled. At Amir Kabir University of Technology in Tehran, plainclothes agents illegally closed the university gate and then beat protesters who were trapped on the campus. A water cannon was stationed in front of the university, and phone lines and internet connections were disabled during the lock-down. Protesters were physically attacked at other universities as well. Arrests have been reported from the University of Tehran, Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, Kurdistan University in Sanandaj, Razi University in Kermanshah, and Noshirvani University in Babol.

These actions all contravene Iranian law: Article 27 of the country's constitution expressly permits unarmed assemblies and marches. Further, state security agencies have no legal justification to enter university grounds unless explicitly invited to do so by the university administration.

In light of these protections, students at the University of Tehran organized a silent sit-in on 16 January 2020, protesting the arrests of fellow students two days prior. During the sit-in, they held up placards demanding answers from Mr. Soleimani, the head of university security, who had permitted state security agents to enter the campus on 14 January 2020 to dissolve the protest and arrest students.

Several hours into the silent sit-in, plainclothes security agents entered the university grounds once again, broke up the sit-in, arrested at least eight students, and then raided a student dormitory. Inside the dormitory, agents searched the personal belongings and phones of those just detained, leading to further protests by fellow students. It is reported that the head of university security, Mr. Soleimani, eventually arrived at the scene, only to take the side of the security forces, claiming that the detained students had violated unspecified rules and insulted the Supreme Leader.

As a result of the failure of university security to protect students against state agents, students reportedly no longer feel safe in university dormitories. They are concerned both about those detained and fear for their own safety. What is more, students reported that the university's security office told them not to speak to media outlets about the arrests. Family members of those arrested have been pressured into not publicizing their children's names.

Students have also been arrested outside university grounds. It has been reported that plainclothes agents walked the streets around campus and initiated discussions with people about the downing of the plane, referring to it as a terrible act. When people agreed, they arrested them.



Re: Arrest of student protestors regarding downing of Ukranian Flight 752

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Such actions have no basis in Iranian law. According to Article 32 of the Iranian Constitution, “No one can be arrested except in accordance with the rule and the procedures that are set by the law. In the case of arrest, the charge and the reason for the arrest must be immediately conveyed and communicated to the defendant in writing.”

Finally, students from the University of Tehran and Beheshti University have reported that instead of policemen, the paramilitary Basij force has been deployed to keep order on the streets around campus. Reports indicate that Basijis have been stationed at street crossings around the universities and at the universities’ entrances and exits. Some have worn face-concealing masks. The point of these deployments is clearly intimidation.

MESA’s Committee on Academic Freedom strongly objects to the invasion of university grounds by state security services. We urge you to ensure that the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij force, and other security agents function in a manner consistent with Iran’s national and international legal obligations, and remain outside campus grounds. We further urge you to cease the unlawful arrest and detention of students across the country.

The arrest by state agents of students while on campus, as well as the raiding of student dormitories, are clear violations of the university’s responsibility to protect students against unlawful arrest and bodily harm. All activities conducted on campus grounds are the responsibility of the university only and must not be interfered with by state security services, especially given that the latter have repeatedly acted in violation of Iranian law.

As an international community of scholars, we believe it is imperative that the fundamental rights of academics everywhere be respected. We urge you to refrain from future invasions of university space and from future arrests of students and scholars who exercise their constitutional right to freedom of assembly.

We thank you for your attention to this serious matter and look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dina Rizk Khoury', with a long, sweeping underline.

Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', with a stylized, cursive script.

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



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cc:

His Excellency Dr. Hassan Rouhani, President

The Honorable Mohammad Javad Zarif, Minister of Foreign Affairs

The Honorable Takht-Ravanchi, Permanent Representative of Iran to the United Nations

The Honorable Michelle Bachelet, The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights