



**Middle
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16 March 2020

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran
c/o H.E. Mr. Takht-Ravanchi
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
Email: iran@un.int
Fax: +1 (212) 867-7086

Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi, Head of the Judiciary
c/o H.E. Mr. Takht-Ravanchi
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
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Your Excellencies,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our grave concern over the harsh and unlawful treatment of Iranian conservationist Niloufar Bayani and her colleagues held in the notorious Evin prison since January 2018, and to demand their immediate release. We are particularly disturbed by the reports of torture and sexual threats that Niloufar Bayani was recently able to smuggle out of prison, further attesting to the abusive detention practices and due process failures to which Bayani and her colleagues have been subjected. We call on Iran's courts to dismiss the 'evidence' against these scholars and environmentalists, which was gathered through unlawful coercion, reverse their sentences and facilitate their immediate release.

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 2,700 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.

We wrote to you previously on [4 April 2019](#) to protest the prolonged arrest and sentencing of eight Iranian environmentalists, among them Ms. Bayani, based on unfounded and arbitrary accusations of espionage and cooperation with hostile governments. Since their initial arrest in January 2018, the cases against these individuals have proceeded with gross violations of their due process rights. More than a year passed before their first hearing in January 2019, during which Ms. Bayani protested their mistreatment in prison and objected to their indictment by arguing that evidence against them was acquired through forced confessions, which are not admissible in Iranian courts. Ms. Bayani continued her protests by writing several letters to Iranian officials, including your excellency, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the warden of her prison, alerting you to such mistreatments with detailed accounts of prolonged interrogations lasting up to 12 hours, and repeated threats of sexual assault and execution by her interrogator. Despite her

protests, in November 2019 an Iranian revolutionary court sentenced the environmentalists to serve unduly long sentences of between 6 and 10 years in prison, with Bayani receiving one of the harshest sentences of 10 years in prison. In February 2020, Iran's court of appeal upheld all of the sentences. In a major violation of their right to due process, none of the arrested environmentalists had access to proper representation, nor the ability to view the evidence brought against them.

Ms. Niloufar Bayani is a devoted conservationist who returned to Iran after her graduate studies in conservation biology in Canada and the United States to apply her expertise to prevent the extinction of Iran's critically endangered Asiatic cheetah and Persian leopard. Alongside her colleagues, Bayani worked at the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a renowned non-profit organization that operates with the permission of the Iranian government to preserve Iran's unique wildlife. The claim of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards that tracking Iran's endangered animals using camera traps—motion-activated devices—constitutes some form of security threat is either a worrying misunderstanding or a deliberate distortion of the work of conservationists. As a [letter](#) of concern from the international community of distinguished conservationists and scholars pointed out in 2019, politicizing “the neutral field of conservation” is a grave mistake.

The Committee on Academic Freedom also objects to the harsh treatment of these environmentalists and their sentencing based on evidence obtained through coercion. We call on Iranian authorities to abide by their national and international legal obligations. Indeed, acquiring confessions under extreme duress violates articles 9 and 10 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran has ratified. Furthermore, forced confessions are inadmissible in courts as per Article 168 of Iran's penal code, adopted in 2013. The prolonged imprisonment of these environmentalists, who merely sought to apply their expertise to help preserve Iran's ecological diversity, will also have negative implications for future collaborations between Iran and other global conservation entities, further harming academic research and exchange in this important field. We echo other academic and environmentalist groups in urging you to reverse the sentences of these individuals, attend to Ms. Bayani's calls for investigating her treatment by her interrogators, which represent a gross miscarriage of justice and the rule of law, and release these innocent conservationists immediately.

Finally, as we noted in our letter to you on 5 March 2020, we are deeply concerned about the rapid spread of the coronavirus across Iran and its risks to Iran's prisoners, including these environmentalists, whose state of health has been rapidly deteriorating since their imprisonment more than two years ago.

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



Re: Immediate release of Niloufar Bayani
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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

cc:

His Excellency Dr. Hassan Rouhani, President
The Honorable Mahmoud Alavi, Minister of Intelligence
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
The Honorable Christina Alexandra Freeland, Minister of Foreign Affairs of
Canada