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22 September 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
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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 deep concern over the detention of two students, Ali Younesi and Amir Hossein Moradi, on what appear to be trumped-up charges, and reports that they are being pressured into making televised false confessions to escape the death penalty.

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 2,500 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.

Ali Younesi and Amir Hossein Moradi, both award-winning students of Iran's leading science university, Sharif University of Technology, were arrested on their way to the university on 10 April 2020 by plainclothes security agents. Ali Younesi was returned to his home later that day with signs of assault and injuries. Security agents then searched his family home and interrogated his parents at an undisclosed location for several hours before releasing them.

Following their 10 April arrest, both students spent 59 days in solitary confinement in Ward 209 of Evin Prison, run by the judiciary's intelligence branch, before being transferred to a general ward. They did not learn of the crimes they were charged with until 5 May 2020, when Judiciary Spokesman Gholam-Hossein Esmaili announced that "explosive devices" had been found in their homes and that the two had planned "acts of sabotage." This claim stands in direct contradiction to the fact that after searching Younesi's home, security agents confirmed that they had found nothing suspicious; moreover, his parents had repeatedly been told that their son's release was "imminent." Esmaili went on to claim that the two students were affiliated with the illegal opposition group the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, a charge the students and their families have dismissed as "total fabrications."

On 14 July 2020, the judiciary took the unusual step of interrogating the two detained university students in a public meeting held at the Prosecutor's office. The meeting included an audience of officials from Sharif University, members of student associations, the Basij, and the University Guild Council. During the session, the interrogator, as well as judicial and intelligence officials, reportedly assailed the two detainees with a barrage of questions, and aired videos allegedly showing the two students committing acts of sabotage. Members of the audience noted that the students' speech was abnormal, often breaking off, suggesting that they had been given sedatives or other substances impairing their ability to communicate clearly. Despite sustained pressure by the interrogators, the students did not accept any of the charges or insinuations.

Subsequent to the public interrogation, which some members of the audience left in protest, the Islamic Association of Sharif University protested that the detained students had been denied the right to see their families and did not have access to an attorney or legal counsel of their choice. The report also noted that "the faces of the individuals in the footage [of the presented videos] were not identifiable," and that the videos offered no evidence substantiating any of the charges levelled against the students.

Ali Younesi and Amir Hossein Moradi are among Iran's top students. Younesi has won gold medals in Iran's National Astronomy Olympiad and the 2018 International Astronomy and Astrophysics Olympiad in China. Amir Hossein Moradi won the Olympiad silver medal of Iran in 2017.

International human rights organizations have repeatedly expressed their concern about the violations of due process rights for the two students. Their solitary confinement for nearly two months without any evidence having been presented in support of the charges violates Iran's obligations according to national law and international rights conventions. Observers were particularly concerned when Ali Younesi fell ill with Covid-19 in June 2020 while in solitary confinement. He was not included among those prisoners who qualified for temporary release. Adding to present concerns, on 6 September 2020, Younesi reported to his family that he had been given the option of making a false confession on national television in order to avoid the death penalty.

The fact that neither student has had access to a lawyer violates international rights conventions. While Article 48 of Iran's criminal procedure law says that access to lawyers for those who face national security charges is limited to a list of lawyers approved by the judiciary, international law guarantees anyone accused of a crime access to a lawyer at all stages of criminal proceedings, including during the investigation, the pretrial proceedings, and during the trial itself: Article 1 of the UN basic principles of the role of a lawyer states, "All persons are entitled to call upon the assistance of a lawyer of their choice to protect and establish their rights and to defend them in all stages of criminal proceedings."



Re: Concern for detained students Ali Younesi and Amir Hossein Moradi in Iran

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We call on you to abide by your obligations under both national and international law to respect due process and to provide prisoners with psychological and physical medical care. We remind you that 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 Iranian courts as per Article 168 of the country's penal code adopted in 2013. We ask also that you treat Ali Younesi and Amir Hossein Moradi humanely, reverse their baseless convictions, and make immediate arrangements for their release.

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 Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human
Rights Defenders
The Honorable Javid Rehman, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of
Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,
The Honorable Tlaleng Mofokeng, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to
Physical and Mental Health
The Honorable Nils Meltzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other
Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment