



**Middle  
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16 March 2021

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](mailto:iran@un.int)  
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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 concern over the imprisonment of Touraj Amini, a historian of the Qajar era and the Iranian Constitutional movement, who is also Baha'i. On 29, January 2021, Mr. Amini was summoned by the Judiciary to begin a six-month prison sentence on charges of spreading propaganda against the state, through his research and publications, none of which, however, deal with the contemporary Iranian state, its politics or society. His sentence and imprisonment are grave violations of his basic rights to academic freedom and freedom of expression, guaranteed by Iran's Constitution. We urge the Court to dismiss the charges against Mr. Amini and to free him without delay, so that he may continue his important scholarship.

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 2,800 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.

Mr. Amini has researched and published works on the history of religious minorities in the Qajar (1789-1925) and Pahlavi (1925-1979) periods. Although his publications do not extend to the Islamic Republic (post-1979), Mr. Amini was charged with spreading propaganda against the state. Indeed, in August 2019, the Ministry of Intelligence searched Mr. Amini's house in Karaj and after many hours, confiscated his laptop and most of his books and manuscripts. In July 2020, the Revolutionary Court of Karaj sentenced Mr. Amini to one year in prison and two years in exile, seemingly due to his writings on the Qajar period. On appeal, the Alborz Provincial Court of Appeals reduced the sentence to six months in prison and rescinded the punishment of two years in exile, suggesting that they found merit in Mr. Amini's defense that his academic work does not violate Iran's laws on academic freedom. On 29 January 2021, with Iran still grappling with high rates of COVID-19 infections,



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particularly among its prison population, Mr. Amini was summoned to begin a six-month prison sentence, and is currently behind bars.

Your Excellencies, we ask that you reconsider this decision and reverse the groundless charges against this historian of pre-revolutionary Iran. We call upon you to allow Mr. Amini to return to his academic research, which contributes to scholarly knowledge of understudied historical periods. Requiring Mr. Amini to serve this sentence is particularly cruel, given the widespread occurrence of the COVID-19 virus in Iran's prisons. Indeed, your state officials have released many prisoners or have placed them under house arrest as a laudable measure to bring the rate of infections under control. Furthermore, Mr. Amini is the sole caretaker of his wife, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. Thus, dropping the charges against him and allowing him to return home would also be a humane act that would ensure his wife's welfare. Finally, we are troubled by the continued harassment of the Baha'is, and maintain that there are no legal grounds for this under Iran's laws. We urge Iranian authorities to observe their Constitution and cease targeting its Bahai'i citizens, among them, Touraj Amini.

Thank you for your attention. We look forward to 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

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 Javid Rehman, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran  
The Honorable Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders



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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