



**Middle
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19 August 2021

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran
c/o H.E. Mr. Majid 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. Majid Takht-Ravanchi
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
Email: iran@un.int
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Your Excellencies,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our deepening concern over the health of the imprisoned environmentalist and conservation biologist, Niloufar Bayani. Ms. Bayani has been held in Evin prison since January 2018 and is serving a 10-year sentence. On 1 August 2021, news outlets reported that Ms. Bayani has contracted COVID-19 and has been sent to a quarantine ward within the prison with minimal access to treatment and medication.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and 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 on two previous occasions ([4 April 2019](#) and [16 March 2020](#)) to object to the arrest and sentencing of eight Iranian environmentalists, among them Ms. Bayani, on baseless charges of espionage and cooperation with hostile governments. From the beginning, the cases against the environmentalists have been replete with rights violations, including breaches of due process, lack of evidence, harsh interrogations, psychological torture, and threats of future physical and sexual harm. The defendants, including Ms. Bayani, were deprived of the rights to adequate legal representation and to review the evidence against them. Each of these violations contravenes not only Iran's obligations under international law, but also its own laws of criminal procedure.

Ms. Bayani, herself, has publicly protested the charges against her and her colleagues and their treatment, both during trial and in prison. Moreover, she has written numerous letters to Iranian officials, including your excellency, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the warden of her prison, outlining abuse and threatening behavior towards her, which we, too, documented in our letter of 16 March 2020. Despite, or perhaps due to, Ms. Bayani's public accounts of her



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treatment, she received one of the most severe sentences: 10 years confinement, a punishment that was upheld by Iran's Court of Appeals in February 2020.

Ms. Bayani is a dedicated conservationist who completed her graduate studies in conservation biology in Canada and the United States. After working for the United Nations' Environment Program (UNEP) in Geneva, Ms. Bayani returned to Iran to lend her expertise to prevent the extinction of Iran's critically endangered Asiatic cheetah and Persian leopard. Alongside her colleagues, Ms. Bayani worked at the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a renowned non-profit organization that operates with the authorization of the Iranian government to preserve Iran's unique wildlife. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' contention that the environmentalists' tracking of Iran's endangered animals using camera traps constitutes a security threat is a grave misapprehension of the work of environmental conservationists. Indeed, Iran's own Intelligence Ministry at the time stated that there was a lack of evidence to support the claims brought against the environmentalists.

The Committee on Academic Freedom continues to protest the unjust treatment and sentences of the Iranian environmentalists, including Ms. Bayani, and appeals for their immediate release. Additionally, we join Ms. Bayani in her demand for an investigation into her interrogators' actions, which, if confirmed, amount to gross violations of due process and human rights.

As we noted in our letter of 16 March 2020, we remain 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 deteriorating since their imprisonment almost three years ago. With the prevalence of the Delta variant, Iran has now entered its fifth COVID-19 surge. As hospitals are full, medical staff are exhausted, and only three percent of the population has been vaccinated, [Iran is experiencing a staggering rate of one death every two minutes](#). Given these desperate conditions, we urge you to release Ms. Bayani on humanitarian grounds and without delay, so that she may seek medical care under humane conditions.

We thank you for your attention to this urgent matter and look forward to your positive 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



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', is written in a cursive style.

Laurie Brand

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, University of Southern California

cc:

His Excellency, Ebrahim Raisi, President

The Honorable Mahmoud Alavi, Minister of Intelligence

The Honorable Mohammad Javad Zarif, Minister of Foreign Affairs

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

The Honorable Michelle Bachelet, UN 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 Joseph Jean-Pierre Marc Garneau, Minister of Foreign Affairs of
Canada