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12 January 2023

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 Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejehi
Head of the Judiciary
c/o H.E. Mr. Takht-Ravanchi
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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 outrage over the nine-year sentence issued against Professor Saeed Madani, a prominent sociologist of Iran. Dr. Madani has devoted decades of his career to sociological research and dissemination of his findings on social movements, children's rights, and addiction in Iran, among other scholarly activities. The conviction and lengthy prison sentence handed down to Dr. Madani constitute clear violations of his academic freedom, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience, as protected by Iran's own laws and its legal obligations under international law.

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 2,400 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.

Dr. Madani has a long history of political activism in Iran, going back to before the 1979 revolution. He has used his scholarly platform to raise awareness and speak out against social harms and societal inequities, particularly on behalf of the most disadvantaged in the country.

Dr. Madani is a member of the banned political group, The Council of Nationalist-Religious Activists of Iran, a non-violent civil society group that calls for reform and seeks to hold Iranian leaders to the rule of law as laid out by the country's Constitution. He is also a member of the Social Problems and Harms Group of the Iranian Sociological Association and a member of the Social Welfare Research Group of the University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences in Tehran. In addition, he edits the journal *Social Welfare*. Dr. Madani has led numerous research projects on various topics related to social harm in Iran, including poverty, inequality, addiction, and prostitution. He has published widely on capital punishment, civil society, social movements, violence against women, and children's rights in Iran.

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Critical of Dr. Madani's research activities, Iran's government officials have prevented him from obtaining a permanent faculty position, although he has taught at many of Iran's top universities. In recent years, authorities have prohibited him from publishing his research results in Iran and traveling abroad.

In 2016, after having served four years of a six-year prison sentence, Dr. Madani was exiled to the southern port city of Bandar Abbas. Then, in January 2022, he was prohibited from leaving Iran to take up a one-year position at Yale University. He was subjected to prolonged interrogation in the middle of the night after he had already checked his luggage and was scheduled to board his flight to the U.S.

In May 2022, Dr. Madani was arrested in his home by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and charged with "forming and administering dissident groups," "propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran," and "assembly and collusion to commit crimes against the security of the country." The evidence supporting these charges included Dr. Madani's membership in the Civil Rights Association, an organization licensed by the Interior Ministry, the publication of his book against capital punishment, *Against the Death Penalty*, and a meeting with Iran's former president, Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005).

On 24 December 2022, Branch 29 of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Court issued its ruling, finding Dr. Madani guilty of "forming and administering dissident groups" and "propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran." (He was acquitted of the charge of "assembly and collusion to commit crimes against the security of the country.") Dr. Madani was sentenced to eight years in prison for the first charge and one year for the second, for a total of nine years, eight of which are mandatory.

Despite the charges against him, Iranian authorities recognize his expertise when it comes to civil society, social movements, repression and inequality. According to his lawyer, Mahmoud Behzadirad, Dr. Madani was consulted inside Evin prison on three separate occasions by Intelligence Ministry officials, who asked his opinion about how to stop the ongoing protests. Apparently, he replied that the authorities should stop their violent repression and respect the rights of protestors. This is hardly the first example of the state seeking the expert advice of its prisoner-scholars.

The harsh sentence against Dr. Madani is one of the most recent examples of the continuing persecution of Iranian scholars and researchers in the country since the state killing of Mahsa Jhina Amini, on 16 September 2022, which sparked nationwide outrage and protests that have continued to this day. The arbitrary arrest, interrogation, imprisonment, and killing of Iranian academics, researchers and students are violations of Iran's Constitution, Article 23, concerning the freedom of opinion, thought, and conscience.

We continue to call upon the Iranian authorities to release all protestors, including those like Dr. Madani, who have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms simply for expressing their views and publishing their research. We demand that the authorities halt the targeting of scholars, students, teachers, and researchers, release all political prisoners and prisoners of conscience, and respect academic freedom, which is consistent with the country's domestic laws and its obligations under international law.



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Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Eve M. Troutt Powell
MESA President
Professor, University of Pennsylvania

Laurie A. 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 Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs
The Honorable Takht-Ravanchi, Permanent Representative of Iran to the United Nations
The Honorable Volker Türk, The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
The Honorable Javaid 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
The Honorable Tlaleng Mofokeng, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Physical and Mental Health
The Honorable Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression
The Honorable Leigh Toomey, Chair-Rapporteur for the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention
The Honorable Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer - Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI), European Parliament
Kato Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament
Maria Arena, Chair, Subcommittee on Human Rights, European Parliament
Dunja Mijatovic, Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe