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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
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Your Excellencies,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America to express our grave concern over the intentional poisoning and terrorizing of schoolgirls and female college students in Iran over the past several months. As advocates for academic freedom and unhindered access to education, we find reports about these attacks shocking, and fear their negative implications on girls' and women's education in general, as well as on the overall progress and development of Iranian society. It has also been disappointing to see that Iranian officials, in the four months since the beginning of the attacks by poisoning in November 2022, have failed to adequately address this major concern of the Iranian population. While we acknowledge the government's recent announcement of its investigation and arrests related to the poisoning, we are concerned about limited transparency and accountability in all judicial actions taken against the perpetrators. We therefore echo the calls of other civil society and academic groups for independent investigation of the poisonings under the guidance of relevant international treaty parties.

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 2400 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.

In November 2022, the first school poisoning was reported in the city of Qom, where a number of students at a girls' high school complained of symptoms of temporary shortness of breath, coughing and dizziness, combined with sensations of paralysis and numbness in their limbs. The medical examiners concluded that the symptoms were associated with inhaling poisonous gas. Just days after this attack, the students in this same school were subjected to yet another attack, but this time, a much larger proportion of the student population was poisoned and sent to hospital with similar symptoms that ranged from shortness of breath to

feelings of paralysis, as well as nausea and vomiting. Since then, such attacks have steadily increased and spread across the country. By early March 2023, the attacks had impacted at least [7,068 students](#) from at least 103 different schools and female college dormitories. The attacks have been recorded in at least 99 cities in 28 provinces. There are even reports of poisoning attacks on female college dormitories while students were asleep. With the exception of one reported attack on a male-only school, all the poisonings have occurred in female-only high schools and college dormitories in Iran's gender-segregated educational system. Thus, the gendered intent of these attacks is laid bare. Given the absence of independent media in Iran, we fear that these attacks could be even more widespread, particularly in Iran's remote areas.

Unfortunately, many high-ranking government officials did not take these initial reports seriously, and even hindered journalistic investigations of the poisonings by [imprisoning journalists](#) in Qom and other affected cities, simply for covering these shocking events. With continued mass protest and anger, particularly by parents and students, various state officials, including the State Attorney General and the Minister of Education, finally confirmed in late February 2023 that the poisonings had been intentional and that the perpetrators needed to be found and tried. Despite these official condemnations, including strong words from Your Excellency, Ayatollah Khamenei, on 7 March 2023 that "such attacks are unforgivable," the attacks have continued, and many schoolgirls and female college students remain too fearful to attend school and pursue their education. Parents and students from various schools continue to pressure school administrators to provide virtual schooling options, given the risks of poisoning attacks on school grounds. Many others have simply stopped attending school in light of school administrators' failure to address their demands for safety. In a country that has largely valued girls' and women's education, it is extremely worrying to see that this fundamental right is being restricted in such a manner, and that some Iranian officials have publicly dismissed the students' symptoms as mere hysteria and stress.

Access to education, free from violence and intimidation, is a fundamental human right for all individuals regardless of gender. Iran has been committed to the protection of this right, both in its national laws as well as by ratifying relevant international documents, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, given the state's laxity in responding to this crisis and its inability to protect its female student population after four months of serial and widespread poisoning attacks, the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association asks for greater transparency. We request that you continue to demonstrate your commitment to the protection and assurance of this fundamental right by working closely with relevant international bodies, such as UNESCO and the WHO, to which Iran is state party. We affirm the need for an independent investigation followed by just and transparent judicial action against the perpetrators of these attacks. We also ask the government to provide necessary accommodations and safeguards for the students affected so that they may get on with their education as soon as possible.

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, UN 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
Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Fiona Knab-Lunny, Member of Cabinet of Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) of the European Parliament
Hannah Neumann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
Raphael Glucksmann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
Bernard Guetta, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
Christian Sagartz, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights
Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights
David McAllister, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament
Kati Piri, Member of the Dutch Parliament