



**Middle  
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16 August 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  
622 Third Avenue, 34th Floor  
New York, NY 10017, USA  
Email: iran@un.int  
Fax: +1 (212) 867-7086

Chief Justice Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejechi, 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) of North America to protest the heightened pressures and crackdowns on university women's dress, negatively impacting their rights to education. We are particularly concerned about the various types of harassment and unjust punishment that female university students have been subjected to since the eruption of the "woman, life, freedom" protests across Iran in September 2022. Such harassment has included suspension or expulsion from university, arrest or threats of lengthy prison sentences for students who defy the country's hijab laws or show solidarity with the protesters. Barring students from university campuses or expunging their grades and university credits for lawful acts of civil disobedience violates their right to education, a fundamental right that is protected under Iranian law. We therefore call for the immediate reversal of such mistreatment. We demand that Iranian officials protect rather than restrict women's access to education and academic freedom.

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 close to 2800 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.

MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom has repeatedly condemned violations of academic freedom that have occurred on university campuses throughout Iran. In our most recent letters, we protested the violent attacks on academic institutions, teachers and students who joined the demonstrations following the death in custody of Mahsa (Jhina) Amini ([October 2022](#)) and condemned



Iranian authorities' inadequate efforts at finding and punishing the perpetrators of mass poisoning of female students at various institutions across the country ([March 2023](#)). We are concerned that instead of working to foster a safe academic environment conducive to education, the government is engaged in intensified efforts to securitize Iranian universities and subject students and faculty to greater surveillance, pressure, and harassment.

We condemn the April 2023 statement by Iran's Education Ministry that threatened banning educational services to students who do not follow dress codes, including the restrictive form of hijab. Since the issuance of that statement, repeated reports have revealed that authorities have in fact threatened female students with suspension, expulsion, and arrest for defying the country's head-covering laws. In recent weeks, at least [60 female students](#) have been barred from university, while many more face expulsion or the erasure of their grades and university credits for having resisted mandatory veiling. Such rulings are handed down to students at hearings organized by university disciplinary committees which provide no opportunity for the accused to contest the accusations or appeal. Other recent reports document university security teams violently raiding dormitories and harassing and arresting students either for sharing social media posts in support of the protesters or women's right to freedom of dress, or for participating in student sit-ins or strikes.

We are further concerned that the hijab and chastity bill currently under consideration by the Iranian parliament as introduced by the Judicial and Legal Committee mandates harsher punishments for those with "a bad hijab," ranging from sizable fines to several years in prison. The bill also expands the authority of Iran's police apparatuses to empower university security teams to surveil and "deal" with women with "bad hijab". This includes the surveillance of students' social media activity that demonstrates opposition to the hijab, as well as the use of artificial intelligence to identify women in breach of the dress code. This bill further mandates gender segregation at universities alongside other spaces that until now were co-ed, such as hospitals and offices. Gender segregation at institutions of higher education can greatly undermine the quality of education received and expertise gained, limiting opportunities for important exchange and dialogue across genders, perspectives, and experiences.

Access to education free from violence and intimidation is a fundamental human right for all individuals regardless of gender. Iran has committed to the protection of this right, both in its national laws and in ratifying relevant international treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The violent crackdowns on female students as they exercise their right to freedom of expression contradict such commitments. In addition, limiting women's access to education will negatively impact progress and development in Iran, a country that depends on the expertise and contributions of all its citizens. The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association thus requests the immediate reversal of any suspension or

expulsion decisions that have been handed down to university students, and the end to such unjust treatment. We also demand that Iranian authorities cease the securitization of universities and end all forms of surveillance, harassment, or pressure of students and faculty, including those who are engaging in peaceful protests and exercising their basic right to freedom of expression. We urge the state and university officials to protect students and faculty and safeguard their rights on university campuses and beyond.

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  
Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

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Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI) of the European Parliament

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

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

Kati Piri, Member of the Dutch Parliament (The House of Representatives)

David McAllister, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament