

**Middle
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Association**
of North America, Inc

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11 April 2024

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
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Chief Justice Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejeji, Head of the Judiciary
c/o H.E. Mr. Takht-Ravanchi
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United
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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 concern over the arrest of Prof. Sedigheh Vasmaghi, a prominent theologian, poet, expert on Islamic jurisprudence in Iran, and women's rights advocate. On 16 March 2024 plainclothes officers entered Prof. Vasmaghi's home and arrested her, while confiscating her personal devices such as her mobile phone and laptop. This recent arrest violates Iran's own due process laws and is a gross denial of her basic rights, including freedom of expression. It is also a continuation of years-long intimidation and harassment that this renowned scholar has been subjected to by Iran's governing authorities largely as a result of her vocal opposition to the Islamic Republic's gender discriminatory laws, such as mandatory veiling, and its violent crackdowns on peaceful protestors.

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 and the freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Prof. Vasmaghi is among the few women scholars who have taught and published extensively on Islamic law in Iran, including on women's rights in Islam. She is a formerly tenured professor of theology at the University of Tehran, with many of her publications, such as her book, *Women, Jurisprudence, Islam* (2014), reaching transnational audiences, even while banned in her home country. Many of her publications have examined women's rights and human rights concerns using an Islamic framework, arguing that Islamic law gives women more rights than they have at present in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Prof. Vasmaghi is also an award-winning poet. Her poetry collection, *Praying for Rain* (1989), was awarded the Best Book Award by Al-Zahra University in Tehran. Alongside her academic work, Prof. Vasmaghi was also elected to serve in Tehran's first city council in 1998, an indication of her interest in serving the community in addition to her scholarly work.

Drawing from her academic expertise in Islamic jurisprudence, Prof. Vasmaghi has been outspoken in support of women's rights and challenging the discriminatory gender rulings of the Islamic Republic of Iran that systematically violate some of women's basic rights. Iranian authorities have repeatedly harassed and intimidated her for this, to the extent that she was forced to leave Iran for six years in 2011 to continue her scholarly work in Germany and Sweden. She decided to return to Iran in 2017 to serve her country, only to be charged soon after her arrival with propaganda against the state for which she received a five-year suspended sentence from the Revolutionary Court. Major bodies, such as PEN International and our committee, have protested such treatment.

Despite the state's attempts to silence her, Prof. Vasmaghi has remained vocal and active. Throughout the years, she has signed various petitions in support of peaceful protestors in Iran who demand their basic rights. Indeed, her signature on one petition in support of peaceful protestors in 2019 resulted in a 2020 Revolutionary Court sentence of an additional year in prison (to the original five) for her "activities against the state," a decision about which our committee [wrote to you](#). Following the wave of protests that erupted in 2022 centered around 'woman, life, freedom,' Prof. Vasmaghi publicly condemned the violent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrators and demanded accountability from the state for those who were killed.

As a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, Prof. Vasmaghi also penned an open letter to your excellency, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in April 2023, voicing her criticism of Iran's compulsory hijab laws. Drawing from

her expertise and years of engagement with Islamic jurisprudence through a feminist lens, she asked the following: “how can the Islamic Republic justify such strict enforcement of mandatory veiling when even the Quran does not specify the need for women to cover their hair”? Prof. Vasmaghi has chosen to appear unveiled in public, including in her social media and virtual media interviews, showing her solidarity with women and girls who are boldly demanding the repeal of forced veiling laws. In October 2023 she was violently assaulted by Iranian security forces while attending without a head covering the funeral of 17-year-old Armita Garavand who, similar to Mahsa Jina Amini the year before, had also lost her life after an alleged altercation with the morality police enforcing the hijab requirement. To our dismay, it is clear that the regime has opted to punish this eminent scholar of Islam rather than engage with her and her arguments. Such harsh treatment of Prof. Vasmaghi is indicative of the Iranian regime’s disregard and disrespect for women, as it dismisses even the opinions of a female scholar who is an expert in religious matters.

The [current charges](#) against Prof. Vasmaghi are “propaganda against the system in cyberspace” and “appearing in public places without the Shari‘a-compliant hijab”. It has been [reported](#) that she has refused to appear for hearings at the Islamic Revolutionary Court over these charges, declaring the presiding judges as, in her words, “unjust” in an “illegitimate system”. While in custody at Evin prison, Prof. Vasmaghi has also refused to wear the headscarf, which has resulted in additional violations of her rights, including visitation rights. As of this writing, Prof. Vasmaghi has begun a sit-in protest in Evin Prison to denounce the authorities' refusal to grant her family visits; other female inmates have also joined this protest to express their solidarity.

Politically motivated harassment and intimidation of Prof. Vasmaghi by the Revolutionary Guard’s Intelligence Organization have intensified in recent years, resulting in this most recent arrest in violation of Iran’s own laws guaranteeing freedom of expression. Prof. Vasmaghi’s arrest is particularly cruel given her near-blindness, for which she requires the assistance of her husband and close medical supervision and care.

We call upon you to release Prof. Vasmaghi from prison immediately and to drop all charges against her so that she can continue her widely acclaimed research and scholarship.

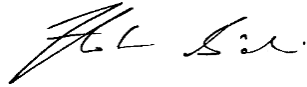
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We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Aslı Ü. Bâli

MESA President

Professor, Yale Law School



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 Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign
Affairs

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

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

Udo Bullmann, 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

Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union
for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy



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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 (House of Representatives)

David McAllister, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament