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20 January 2026

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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 deep concern over the unprecedented level of lethal state violence directed at protests that began in Tehran on 28 December 2025 and spread across Iran in the subsequent two weeks. We are shocked and appalled by reports of the high number of civilians shot dead—exceeding 3,700 according to the Human Rights Activists News Agency—as well as the thousands of arrests. Among those killed and those arrested are numerous high school and university students and faculty members. Of the students killed in the streets who have been identified by the media, we acknowledge, for example, Robina Aminian (23 years old), a student of textile and

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fashion at Shariat College in Tehran, and Ayda Heydary and Zahra Behluly who studied at Tehran University. Moreover, academic institutions have been subjected to the crackdown: students, faculty and staff are denied the right to free speech and protest through the presence of security forces, closures, and internet and phone blackouts.

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

Our committee has consistently affirmed the right of all Iranian citizens, including members of the academic community, to protest and to express their views without fear of expulsion, arrest, or violence. Since the onset of the protests, students and faculty at dozens of institutions of higher education across Iran have been suffering from a wide range of repressive measures. In several instances, security forces have entered university campuses to intimidate and arrest students and faculty members. Those exercising their right to protest have been fired upon with pellet guns and live ammunition, resulting in a high number of casualties. The government has further violated students' right to education and their civil liberties by closing universities and other educational institutions. In addition, the academic community in Iran—along with the broader society—has been subjected to a comprehensive information blackout following the government's decision to shut down internet and telephone services. This has denied them their inalienable right to information and free communication, rights enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Iran is a signatory.

While we have previously raised concerns about violations of students' and scholars' civil liberties, we are now more alarmed than ever by the scale and intensity of these abuses. We join other academic associations in demanding an immediate end to the violence and arrests targeting citizens in Iran, including students and scholars. We urge the authorities to immediately cease the use of force against protesters, to restore access to the internet and telecommunications, and to respect the right to protest and freedom of expression on Iran's campuses and beyond.

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In addition, Iranian academics, lawyers, jurists, artists, and civil society activists are calling for the creation of an independent committee composed of qualified members from within their own ranks to examine the scope and consequences of the recent crackdown on protests. We fully support this rightful demand of Iran's scholarly and civil society communities.

We urge you to attend to this vital matter, and await your response.

Sincerely,



Ussama Makdisi  
MESA President  
Professor, University of California, Berkeley



Judith E. Tucker  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor Emerita, Georgetown University

Cc

The Honorable Esmaeil Khatib, Minister of Intelligence

The Honorable Abbas Araghchi, Minister of Foreign Affairs

The Honorable Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

The Honorable Mai Sato, 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

Mounir Satouri, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

David McAllister, Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET)

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Kaja Kallas, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Adam Romanowski, Member of the Cabinet of Kaja Kallas, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Marta Temido, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Lukasz Kohut, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Michael O'Flaherty, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights