

**Middle
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Studies
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of North America, Inc.

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22 February 2010

Lt. General (Retired) Sheikh Jabir al-Khaled al-Jabir al-Sabah
Minister of Interior
al-Safat, Kuwait

via fax: +965 2246 6334

Your Excellency,

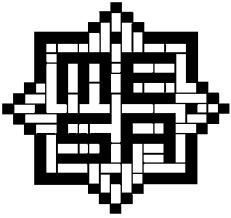
I write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern regarding two scholars who have been barred from entering Kuwait. As a result, these prominent scholars were unable to present their research at professional meetings to which they had been invited for precisely that purpose. In both cases, the scholars were issued entry visas by Kuwait that were later revoked. We are especially troubled because these violations of academic freedom occur so closely together.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) was founded in 1996 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has more than 3000 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.

Professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is a noted Egyptian scholar of the Qur'an who has been living in the Netherlands since 1995. He holds the Ibn Rushd Chair of Humanism and Islam at Utrecht University. He was honored by the Ibn Rushd Fund in 2005 as an outstanding representative of enlightened thought in the Islamic world. An important liberal scholar of Islam, he was invited to Kuwait by the Center for Dialogue on Culture and the Social and Cultural Society for Women. He was scheduled to give two lectures on "Religious Reform in the Constitutional State" and on "Women's Issues Between the Quran and Accepted Jurisprudential Thought." Upon arriving at the Kuwait International Airport on 15 December 2009, he was informed that his already-approved visa was invalid, denied entry and forced to leave on an airplane to Cairo.

Professor Madawi al-Rasheed is a well-known and respected professor of Anthropology at Kings College in London who writes extensively on Saudi Arabian history and politics. She was invited to participate in the 7th annual meeting of the Global Strategy Group, Middle East to be convened in mid-February 2010 by Jusoor Arabiya, a leading Kuwaiti consultancy firm. She was also scheduled to give a public lecture on "Suspended Political Reform in the Arab World" to the Institute for Women's Development and Training. Professor Al Rasheed had been issued an entry visa to Kuwait on January 26. The Kuwaiti government later revoked it without providing any explanation.

We are disturbed that, within the last two months, the government of Kuwait has denied entry to two individuals who hold what may be considered controversial opinions about social and political issues. The fact that the entry visas were approved by your Ministry - only to be withdrawn later - suggests that political pressures were exerted to reverse the



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decisions. Kuwait has repeatedly committed itself to freedom of expression and to open dialogue about development. Your country has often been an example of positive democratic developments in the region including the election of a Parliament, a relatively open press and diverse civil society organizations. I also note that this is the first time that MESA has had to write a letter to your offices since 2000. We regret we must do so now.

We ask for an explanation of what occurred in the cases of Professors Abu Zayd and al-Rasheed. We urge the Government of Kuwait to revoke the bans on these scholars and to permit them to participate in the vibrant intellectual life for which Kuwait is known. More generally, we urge you to protect freedom of expression that appears to be under assault in the last few weeks. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Roger M.A. Allen
MESA President
Professor of Arabic & Comparative Literature, University of Pennsylvania

cc:

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