

March 13, 2006

His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan  
The Minister of Education  
Ministry of Education  
C/O The United Arab Emirates Embassy  
PO Box 295  
Abu Dhabi  
United Arab Emirates

VIA FACSIMILE 202-243-2432

Your Excellency:

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America. We wish to express our concern regarding the firing in early February of Claudia Kiburz, a teacher in the English Language Center of Zayed University. We view her dismissal as a violation of academic freedom and the right to freedom of expression, and urge you to reinstate Ms. Kiburz to her position.

The Middle East Studies Association of North American (MESA) was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the International the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has more than 2600 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.

According to information provided to our committee, you ordered Ms. Kiburz's dismissal on February 7, 2006, several days after she had initiated a discussion in her class regarding the controversial and insulting caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad that had appeared months earlier in a Danish newspaper and were later republished elsewhere. During this discussion Ms. Kiburz reportedly also displayed to the students some of the caricatures in question. A number of students complained to the university administration, and a text-message campaign against Ms. Kiburz apparently ensued. As far as we can determine, your decision to dismiss Ms. Kiburz was issued in a summary fashion, without any regard to procedural safeguards and processes that faculty should have to protect their rights and to contest administrative actions taken against them.

According to news reports, Andrew Hirst, the head of the English Language Center, was also dismissed. He was reinstated to his position the following week, but we

understand that he has been told that his contract will not be renewed. We believe that any university decisions regarding Mr. Hirst's contract should not be taken for punitive purposes as a result of this incident.

In a statement about this case to media in the United Arab Emirates, you wrote: "Despite the freedom of expression and tolerance that we have in our country and all academic institutions, the professor of English at Zayed University has no right to behave like this."

We respectfully disagree. We recognize that many Muslims have taken offense at these caricatures of the Prophet, and we share your revulsion to the anti-Muslim prejudices that some of them manifestly embody. However, the right to academic freedom in the classroom, if it is to have any meaning, must extend to materials that some might find offensive or objectionable, and with which they strongly disagree. From the information we have been able to obtain, it appears that in this case the teacher was attempting to discuss issues related to freedom of expression, using the caricatures as a case in point. There has been no suggestion from any quarter that she was attempting to incite hatred of Muslims or any persons or group.

Ms. Kiburz's classroom initiative in this instance falls well within the realm of protected speech, and her dismissal constitutes a clear infringement of her academic freedom as well as that of the community of Zayed University. We therefore urge you to rescind her dismissal without delay and extend to her an offer of unconditional reinstatement. We also reiterate our concern that no punitive measures be taken against Mr. Hirst in connection with this matter.

We look forward to your positive response in this important matter.

Sincerely,

Juan R.I. Cole  
President