

January 16, 2007

Prime Minister Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum
c/o United Arab Emirates Embassy in Washington, DC
Fax: 202-243-2432

Dear Prime Minister Shaikh Maktoum:

I am writing to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom. We wish to convey to you our great concern regarding the October arrest and questioning of an American scholar, Assistant Professor Syed Ali, and his subsequent expulsion from Dubai. Given that a growing number of US universities have branches or programs in Dubai, Professor Ali's case, as detailed below, raises serious concerns about the ability of other faculty to pursue their research without harassment or fear of expulsion.

The Middle East Studies Association of North America (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 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.

Syed Ali teaches in the Department of Sociology at Long Island University, and was the recipient of a prestigious Fulbright fellowship, a grant which provided the funding enabling him and his family to travel to the UAE so that he could conduct his research. On 22 October 2006, five men in dishdashas who refused to identify themselves, and one woman identified as a member of the police force, presented Professor Syed Ali with a court order to search-and-confiscate. The six came to the home of the professor's friend, where he had been for only three days awaiting the arrival of his wife and son in Dubai. This was also only one day before the professor and his family were scheduled to take a flight to India.

The five men searched the apartment thoroughly and confiscated the professor's laptop computer and also his iPod, backup CDs, hand-written notes, and computer printouts. Then they told him that he had to go with them. His wife, Eli, who had arrived a few hours earlier, said that she and their son Sami wanted to accompany him, but the six would not allow this. Nor did they allow her to retain her husband's mobile phone, even though she had no telephone of her own and knew no one in Dubai. They then took Professor Ali to the police headquarters in Deira, where they made him put his head down so that his face would not be visible through the window, before they took him into the compound through a side gate.

Once inside, Professor Ali was interrogated for approximately thirteen hours by two men, one of whom claimed that he had studied in Russia. The professor asked whether the US consulate had been informed about his arrest. The men answered "yes." The questioning concentrated on the professor's background: where he was born; when he came to the United States; his educational history; and his employment history. Interspersed with these questions were sudden interjections: Why did you come to Dubai? Who is funding you? Why are you asking so many questions about locals? Who gave you permission to come? Professor Ali has told us that he answered all their questions but they did not accept his answers, asking him the same things over and over again. He also says that at no time were the questioners violent; they did not even raise their voices.

**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

The University of Arizona
1219 N Santa Rita Ave
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520.621.5850
520.626.9095 fax
mesana@u.arizona.edu
www.mesa.arizona.edu

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Meanwhile, the professor's wife had gone to a hotel near the friend's apartment to call the US consulate. As a Fulbright fellow, Ali and his family were traveling under the sponsorship of the US Department of State. Contrary to the assurances given him by the interrogators, neither the ambassador nor the consul general had been informed about his arrest. They were able to locate him after more than nine hours of attempts, and managed to arrange for his release. Comparing notes afterward, it seems that the interrogators halted the questioning at about the same time that the US consulate received word that Ali would be released. They departed, leaving him alone in the interrogation room for about two hours. Then a superior officer appeared. Professor Ali asked if he was being charged. The officer replied that he could be held for 48 hours without charge. The officer also stated that he had been asking too many questions about Emirates and expatriates, and since Professor Ali had not answered satisfactorily, they would be keeping his files, although they would return his laptop after they had taken the data from it. Then he would have to leave on the next available flight. When he asked to be able to take his scheduled flight to India, the officer agreed, but told Professor Ali that when he returned to the United States, he would be forbidden to transit through Dubai. He would be arrested if he attempted to enter Dubai again.


The next day, Professor Ali was informed by telephone that his belongings would be returned; concerned because the caller did not identify himself, the professor arranged to meet him at a mall. There he met two men, neither of whom showed any identification. When asked, one said that he did not have to show his identification. Professor Ali was instructed to write a receipt stating that his electronic equipment had been returned in "best operating condition" even though the iPod he was given was not his own, and his computer was missing both its hard drive and operating system. Soon after that, an embassy car took the professor his wife and son to the airport to board their scheduled flight to India.

Professor Ali has no idea why he was arrested and his property confiscated and destroyed. He had been in the UAE for only a short time when these events transpired and no charges were filed against him. In addition to frightening the professor and his family, these men, apparently agents of the UAE government also destroyed his equipment and confiscated his notes and printouts. Moreover, the apparent decision to ban Professor Ali from returning to Dubai will impede his ability to complete the field work for his book, thus delaying or obstructing the publication of work necessary for him to retain his university position.

We ask that you investigate these events and request that the agents responsible return his notes and printouts and compensate Professor Syed Ali for the cost of replacing his computer. We also ask that you consider inviting him back to the UAE under your protection so that he can complete his research.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,



Zachary Lockman
MESA President

Cc: Dr. Hanif Hassan Ali, Ministry of Education (+971 2994535)
Dr. Owaida Hamed Suhail Al-Khaili, Chancellor al-Ain University (+971-3-7611198)
Dr. Kamal Nasser, Vice-Chancellor al-Ain University (+971-3-7611198)
Dr. Larry Wilson, Provost and Deputy Vice President Zayed University
Dr. Lance de Masi, President, American University in Dubai, ldemasi@aud.edu
Dr. Elias Bou Saab, Executive Vice President, American University in Dubai,
Dr. Jihad Nader, Provost/Chief Academic Officer, American University in Dubai
Dr. Winfred L. Thompson, Chancellor, American University in Sharjah,
wthompson@aus.edu
Dr. John Mosbo, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, American University in Sharjah,
jmosbo@aus.edu
Ms. Hilary Olsin-Windecker, Public Affairs Officer, Fulbright Program in UAE,
(+971-2-414-2603)
Mr. Gary Garrison, Asian/Middle East Program, Council for International Exchange of
Scholars, (202-362-3442)
US Consulate General in Dubai, 971-4-331-6213