

**Middle
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Committee on
Academic Freedom

October 21, 2018

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Your Highness, Your Excellencies,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our profound concern at the detention of a British PhD student, Matthew Hedges, by Abu Dhabi State Security, and at the decision to charge him with espionage supposedly on behalf of the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service. We believe that the allegations of spying betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of field-based academic research, and that the disappearance of a doctoral student into the state security system risks inflicting immeasurable harm on the reputation of the UAE as a safe, secure, and welcoming place for students and scholars conducting research in and on your country.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support 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 nearly 2500 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.

Matthew Hedges is a PhD student in the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University in the United Kingdom. His dissertation is on tribal defense decision-making in the UAE and examines how concepts of regime security

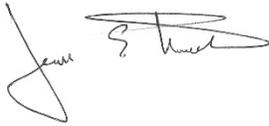
have evolved since 2011. After conducting interviews for his dissertation outside of the UAE, Mr. Hedges travelled to the UAE for a two-week research visit in late April 2018. On 5 May 2018, Mr. Hedges was detained at passport control at Dubai International Airport while returning to the UK. He was taken against his will to Abu Dhabi and held in solitary confinement in degrading conditions with only very sporadic access to British consular officials and his family. Although he was arrested in May, Mr. Hedges was granted legal representation only on 10 October, when he appeared in court, and his hearing was adjourned for two weeks to allow for the court-appointed lawyer to review his case. Mr. Hedges suffers from anxiety and depression and has expressed suicidal thoughts in the five-minute weekly conversations he is permitted with his wife.

State-linked media in the UAE have indicated that Mr. Hedges has confessed to spying for a foreign state, which many took to be an allusion to Qatar, but which appears to refer to the UK. On 27 September 2018, nearly five months after Mr. Hedges was detained, UAE media reported that Attorney General Dr. Hammad Saif Al Shamsi had ordered an “urgent trial” for an unnamed foreign national who had allegedly admitted to the charges of espionage under investigation. *Gulf News*, a Dubai-based English-language newspaper, reported that an Emirati had reported the man, later confirmed as Mr. Hedges, to the Public Prosecution as he was “acting suspiciously, asking sensitive questions about some sensitive departments, and seeking to gather classified information about the UAE.” On 15 October 2018, another English-language newspaper, the Abu Dhabi-based *The National*, referred to Mr. Hedges, by name this time, as someone who “posed as an academic researcher to spy on the country.” While neither *The National* nor the Attorney General stated the country they accused Mr. Hedges of working for, *The Times* of London reported on 17 October that Hedges’ wife had been told that the agency was MI6, Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service.

The UAE has invested heavily in higher education, both domestically and internationally, over the past decade, and has supported academic programs and institutions worldwide. These initiatives have been central to the UAE’s efforts to brand itself as a regional innovation and knowledge hub and have been effective tools of soft power and cultural influence. Matthew Hedges’ lengthy detention and the severity of the charge against him – for which no supporting evidence has thus far been produced – will send shockwaves throughout the academic community and compel universities to reassess the UAE as a safe place for scholarly research. So too will the implication in the *Gulf News* article of 27 September 2018 that Mr. Hedges may have been reported to the authorities by one of his interviewees, as well as the defamatory comments made about him by one of the UAE’s most prominent academics, who has represented as fact the allegation that Mr. Hedges had confessed to spying. Given that Mr. Hedges is due to stand trial at the Court of Appeal’s state security division on 24 October 2018, such prior pronouncements of guilt cast serious doubt on the prospect of Mr. Hedges’ receiving a fair trial and a fair outcome.

Your Excellencies, we have written to you repeatedly over the past two years about the clamping down on academic freedom and freedom of expression in the UAE, most recently on 31 January 2017, 29 March 2017, 5 April 2017, 2 October 2017, 6 October 2017, 6 April 2018, and 30 May 2018. We urge the UAE authorities to immediately release Mr. Hedges and reaffirm the right of scholars and students to conduct legitimate academic fieldwork and research without fear of being reported to State Security on grounds that misrepresent the nature and purpose of scholarly inquiry.

Sincerely,



Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University



Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director

cc:

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