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Committee on
Academic Freedom

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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 grave concern at the deteriorating health of Nasser bin Ghaith, an Emirati professor and economist sentenced in March 2017 to ten years' imprisonment on the basis of public statements and tweets your government deemed 'insulting' to the UAE. We have written repeatedly to you (21 August 2015, 22 August 2016, 5 April 2017) to protest the troubling and unlawful treatment of Dr. bin Ghaith, whose health has declined sharply in recent months. Media reports indicate that Dr. bin Ghaith has been on a hunger strike since 7 October 2018 in protest of his detention, which began in August 2015, and the conditions in which he is being held, and that his health has been worsened by the denial of access to blood pressure medication. We call upon your government to immediately release Dr. bin Ghaith and other prisoners of conscience in the UAE whose only 'crime' has been to exercise their right to freedom of speech.

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.

A respected scholar who taught economics at the Abu Dhabi branch of the Sorbonne, Dr. bin Ghaith was one of five pro-democracy campaigners initially arrested in April 2011. Although President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan pardoned the “UAE5” in December 2011, a day after their conviction for insulting the rulers of the UAE by signing a petition calling for the election of all members of the Federal National Council, members of the “UAE5” and others associated with them have been targeted systematically by your government ever since. In addition to Dr. bin Ghaith, these include the internationally acclaimed human rights defender Ahmed Mansour, about whom we wrote to you on 29 March 2017 and 6 April 2018, and Dr. Mohammed al-Roken, a lawyer who served as defense counsel for two of the “UAE5.” Ahmed Mansour was re-arrested in May 2017 and sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment a year later for publishing “false information” on his social media accounts, and we note with dismay that the State Security Court upheld the verdict and sentence against Mr. Mansour on 31 December 2018. Dr. al-Roken, a former head of the UAE Jurists’ Association, was arrested in July 2012 after taking on the cases of several Emiratis detained in a wide-ranging crackdown on opposition and human rights advocates and was also sentenced to ten years in prison in the July 2013 mass trial of the “UAE94,” which drew strong international criticism.

Dr. bin Ghaith was himself re-arrested by UAE authorities in Abu Dhabi on 18 August 2015 and held in secret detention in an undisclosed location and without access to a lawyer or his family for eight months, until he appeared before a judge in Abu Dhabi in April 2016. He was not informed of the charges against him until his second hearing before the State Security Chamber of the Federal Supreme Court. Dr. bin Ghaith was subsequently charged with “committing a hostile act against a foreign state” because of comments he made on Twitter that criticized the Egyptian authorities on the anniversary of the August 2013 massacre at Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya Square in Cairo, and with “posting false information in order to harm the reputation and stature of the state and one of its institutions,” in reference to statements he made, again on Twitter, that he had not faced a fair trial in 2011 as one of the “UAE5.” Although Dr. bin Ghaith informed the court that he had been beaten and deprived of sleep for one week during his initial period of secret detention, he has been held in solitary confinement since May 2016, first at Al-Sadr jail and, since his conviction in March 2017, at the maximum-security Al-Razeen prison located in the middle of the desert in Abu Dhabi.

On 29 March 2017, Dr. bin Ghaith received a ten-year prison sentence under the 2012 Cybercrime Law and the 2014 Counter Terrorism Law and transferred to Al-Razeen, where, shortly thereafter, Amnesty International reported that inmates had gone on hunger strike to protest alleged sexual harassment and ill-treatment by prison guards. In a letter written from prison, Dr. bin Ghaith stated that “the verdict proves that there is no place for freedom of speech in this country” and announced that he would begin a hunger strike until he was released unconditionally. The latest iteration of Dr. bin Ghaith’s hunger strike has lasted for 75 days, and his health has deteriorated considerably as he is unable to stand properly and has started to lose his eyesight, in addition to suffering from the high blood pressure for which his medication has been withheld.

Your Highness, Your Excellencies, we are extremely concerned at the drastic curtailing of the rights of free speech and academic freedom in the UAE. The pattern of arrests and imprisonment of dissenting voices informed the decision of MESA's Board of Directors to issue a press release on 15 November 2018 on *Deteriorating Security Conditions for Researchers in the United Arab Emirates*. The sentencing of British Ph.D. student Matthew Hedges to life imprisonment for "spying," just six days after the MESA letter was published, focused attention worldwide on the suppression of all forms of independent expression in the UAE. While we welcome the presidential pardon extended to Mr. Hedges on 26 November 2018, we note that countless Emiratis, such as Dr. bin Ghaith, Ahmed Mansour, Dr. al-Roken and many others, remain behind bars serving long sentences for voicing critical – and peaceful – opinions. We call upon your government to immediately release Dr. bin Ghaith and others in his position, observe international laws that pertain to unlawful imprisonment and false charges, and affirm the UAE's commitment to the fundamental right of free expression in your country.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University



Amy W. Newhall
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cc:

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