



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, 71-75 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9JQ

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Dr Massoud Pezeshkian, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran
Dr Hossein Simayi Sarraf, Minister of Science, Research and Technology
Mr. Alireza Kazemi, Minister of Education

c/o H.E. Mr. Saeed Iravani
Permanent Representative of IRI to the United Nations

Sent by Email: iran@un.int

H.E. Mr. Ali Matinfar
Chargé d'affaires, IRI Embassy in the UK

Sent by Email: iranconsulate.lon@mfa.gov.ir, iranemb.lon@mfa.gov.ir

H.E. Mr. Mohammadreza Sabouri
Ambassador, IRI Embassy in Italy

Sent by Email: iranemb.rom@mfa.gov.ir

10 September 2024

Your Excellencies,

We are writing on behalf of the respective Committees on Academic Freedom of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), the Italian Society for Middle East Studies (SeSaMO), and the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) to express our profound concern about the persistent violations of academic freedom, including freedom of research and teaching, and freedom of expression in Iran over the past two years. These violations are evidenced by the multiple cases of dismissal, arrest and detention that have targeted academics and students, in violation of Iran's domestic and international legal obligations.

SeSaMO was founded in 1995 and is a leading Italian organization devoted to the study of the Middle East and North Africa. BRISMES was founded in 1973 to encourage and promote the study of the Middle East and is the leading European association in this field. MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa, and has nearly 2,800 members worldwide. All three associations are committed to promoting academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in Europe, North America and elsewhere.



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The arrest and dismissal of academics who are critical of incumbent governments and political authorities are part of a long and deeply-concerning trend in Iran. In August 2023, the Persian-language newspaper “Etemad” reported that, during the presidency of the late President Ebrahim Raisi (2021-2024), at least 110 academics were dismissed from their positions at universities.¹ This figure is significantly higher than the number of academics expelled during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s administration (2005-2013), which was reportedly 85, and the 14 academics targeted under Hassan Rouhani’s tenure (2013-2021). In March 2024, the Middle East Studies Association’s Committee on Academic Freedom collected the names and profiles of colleagues who were targeted between 2021 and 2023; nearly 100 were expelled, arrested and/or incarcerated.² The reasons behind these measures include support for student protests as part of the 2022-2023 movement known as “Woman Life Freedom”, support for the movement itself or the expression of opinions critical of the government.

Since March 2024, the wave of repression has continued. Colleagues who were targeted with disciplinary measures include Mohsen Borhani³ (Faculty of Law, University of Tehran), Hamideh Khademi (Faculty of Psychology, Allameh Tabatabai University of Tehran), Vahid Eidgah (Faculty of Literature, University of Tehran), Lili Varahram (Faculty of Literature, University of Tehran), Javad Bashari (Faculty of Literature, University of Tehran), Ghasem Azizi (Faculty of Literature, University of Tehran), Milad Azimi (Faculty of Literature, University of Tehran), Dariush Rahmanian (Faculty of Literature, University of Tehran), Hossein Mesbahian (Faculty of Literature, University of Tehran), Mahdi Khoei (Faculty of Sociology, Allameh Tabatabai University), Azin Movahed (Faculty of Arts, University of Tehran), Hassan Bagherinia (Hakim Sabzevari University), Solmaz Akbarzadeh (Al Zahra University, Bushehr), Zahra Mousavi Khameneh (Al Zahra University), and the continued unjustified imprisonment of prominent sociologist and intellectual, Said Madani.⁴

We also highlight the continued incarceration of Iranian-Swedish dual-national scientist Ahmadreza Djalali, who has worked in several European universities, where he co-founded research centers, as in the case of the University of Piemonte Orientale in Italy. Jailed since 2016, in 2017 he was sentenced to death for allegedly threatening national security. Dr Djalali suffers from leukemia, and

¹ توضیحات سخنگوی وزارت علوم درباره اخراج اساتید دانشگاه - The Ministry of Science explains the dismissal of university professors, Etemad online, 10 Shahrivar 1402 - 1 September 2023, <https://www.etemadonline.com/fa/tiny/news-630141>

² Profiles of Dismissed Iranian Academics in 2021-2023, March 2024, <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2024/04/08/profiles-of-dismissed-iranian-academics>

³ See مصاحبه اعتماد با محسن برهانی یک روز پیش از دستگیری؛ حتی اگر قرار بر مجازات حبس - Etemad's interview with Mohsen Burhani a day before his arrest, Etemad online, 18 Tir 1403 – 8 July 2024, <https://www.etemadonline.com/بخش-سیاسی-666416/9-برهانی-دستگیری-زندان>

⁴ We draw these cases from several sources, including https://t.me/senfi_uni_iran/9770, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2023/09/iranian-government-replaces-university-professors-accused-of-backing-woman-life-freedom-protests-with-regime-loyalists/>



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we are worried that prison authorities have reportedly blocked him from receiving necessary medical treatment. Between June and July 2024, Dr Djalali went on hunger strike to protest his continued arbitrary detention.⁵

In addition, we have been deeply concerned by recent developments that demonstrate a clear increase in state and security agencies' interference in the autonomy of universities. Some recent appointments, which have in some cases been motivated by the need to replace dismissed colleagues, seem to lack the necessary academic and scientific credentials. This is evident, for example, in the hiring as university lecturers of anchormen⁶ for TV shows that feature forced confessions of activists and other political dissidents.

Finally, we also highlight state repression against students and restrictions on their right to freedom of expression, including their right to peaceful protest. In August 2024, the Telegram channel of the students' news agency at Amirkabir University of Tehran reported that over 3,000 students had been summoned by disciplinary committees around the country for exercising their freedom of expression on Iranian campuses.⁷ Such measures serve to harass and intimidate students and create highly policed academic spaces, which harm the exchange of knowledge and learning, undermining higher education in Iran with negative consequences for the country as a whole.

Dr Pezeshkian's campaign promises of greater freedoms, including the removal of Iran's extensive internet censors, energized many Iranians, including students and academics, to vote in the hope of important reforms to the status quo. In his speech to the parliament on 20 August 2024, Dr Simayi Sarraf, the new Minister of Science, Research and Technology, rightly stressed the importance of academic freedom and independent inquiry in the social sciences in Iran, as well as the autonomy of scientific institutions, more generally.⁸ As Dr Pezeshkian's government is now beginning to work on implementing its electoral platform of easing tensions and building harmony both domestically and internationally, we urge Dr Pezeshkian's administration to honor these promises and to uphold the rights of academic freedom and freedom of expression, which are essential to building a healthy and prosperous society. Moreover, these are rights that Iran is legally obliged to respect. Academic

⁵ Swedish-Iranian at Grave Risk of Execution in Iran: Ahmadreza Djalali, 8 July 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/8279/2024/en/>

⁶ See Amirhossein Sabeti became a professor at Sharif University, Fars News, 5 Shahrivar 1402 – 27 August 2023, <http://fna.ir/3eodvi> and «زندگی پس از زندگی» هم استاد دانشگاه شریف شد - مجری «زندگی پس از زندگی» هم استاد دانشگاه شریف شد, Dideban Iran, 5 Shahrivar 1402 – 27 August 2023, <https://www.didbaniran.ir/fa/tiny/news-162852>

⁷ <https://t.me/EEAUT/7845>

⁸ See Simayi Sarraf's speech, proposed Minister of Science, Research and Technology to the Parliament, Islamic Republic News Agency, 30 Mordad 1403 - 20 August 2024, www.irna.ir/xjRnMN



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freedom is protected by Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Iran is a state party. Freedom of expression is protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Iran has signed, and Article 19 of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party. Freedom of expression is, furthermore, a right guaranteed to Iranians by Article 24 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Your Excellencies, we call upon you to release all scholars who have been arbitrarily incarcerated for exercising their academic freedom and freedom of expression, uphold academic freedom and freedom of expression for Iranian academics and students, and cease state interference in the hiring and promotion decisions of academics.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicola Pratt
BRISMES President

Dr Lewis Turner
Chair of BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Rosita Di Peri
SeSaMO President

Dr Maria Chiara Rioli
Chair of SeSaMO Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Ash Ü. Bâli
MESA President

Professor Emerita Laurie Brand
Chair of MESA Committee on Academic Freedom