



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

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577

Fax 520-207-3166

caf@mesana.org

mesana.org



1 December 2020

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran
c/o H.E. Mr. Takht-Ravanchi
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
Email: iran@un.int
Fax: +1 (212) 867-7086

Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi, Head of the Judiciary
c/o H.E. Mr. Takht-Ravanchi
Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations
Email: iran@un.int
Fax: +1 (212) 867-7086

Your Excellencies,

We write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) to express our objection to the unjust prosecution and sentencing of Professor Sedigheh Vasmaghi, a prominent theologian, poet, and expert of Islamic jurisprudence in Iran. We are particularly concerned that Prof. Vasmaghi's sentence to one year in prison for "propaganda against the state" appears to be in retaliation for her having signed a petition critical of police brutality against protestors who had participated in demonstrations in November 2019. This conviction is a clear breach of her right to freedom of expression. Given that Prof. Vasmaghi's appeal of this ruling failed, she is now required to serve the sentence alongside a previous five-year suspended sentence, for a total of six years' imprisonment.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Prof. Vasmaghi is among the few women scholars who have taught and published extensively on Islamic law in Iran, including on women's rights in Islam. She is a formerly tenured professor of theology at the University of Tehran, with many of her publications, such as her book, *Women, Jurisprudence, Islam* (2014), reaching transnational audiences, even while banned in her home country. Many of her publications have examined women's rights and human rights concerns from within an Islamic framework, arguing that Islamic law gives women more rights than they have at present in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Prof. Vasmaghi is also an award-winning poet. Her poetry collection, *Praying for Rain* (1989), was awarded the Best Book Award by Al-Zahra University in Tehran.

Despite her non-violent stance, Prof. Vasmaghi has experienced continued harassment and surveillance throughout her career. Such treatment forced her to leave Iran in 2011 to spend six years in Germany and Sweden. In Germany, she was a guest lecturer in the Department of Islamic Studies, University of

Göttingen; while in Sweden, she served as an International Cities of Refuge resident research fellow at Uppsala University. On 14 October 2017, she decided to return to Iran to continue to serve her country. Upon her arrival, she was detained for several hours at Imam Khomeini International Airport and then released, only to appear before the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 22 October 2017. During a hearing that lasted just 10 minutes, the judge referenced a previous ruling issued against Prof. Vasmaghi, before her departure abroad in 2011, on charges of propaganda against the state: in May 2018, the Revolutionary Court condemned Prof. Vasmaghi to a five-year suspended sentence. Major bodies, such as PEN International, considered this treatment to have been politically motivated. Then, in 2019, as Prof. Vasmaghi sought to attend a seminar abroad, Iranian authorities prohibited her from leaving the country, thus further restricting her movement.

In November 2019, Prof. Vasmaghi, along with 76 other high-profile individuals, publicly objected to the violent crackdown on demonstrators who protested the sudden and dramatic increase in oil prices, by signing a petition titled, “Respect People’s Demands.” In June 2020, the Legal Divisions of the Revolutionary Guard’s Intelligence Organization and the Intelligence Ministry filed a complaint against Prof. Vasmaghi accusing her of “activities against the state” in connection with the petition. Prof. Vasmaghi refused to attend the closed Revolutionary Court hearing in protest of its unfounded allegations and the Revolutionary Court’s lack of jurisdiction and improper procedures, including the hearing’s closure to the public. In August, the Revolutionary Court sentenced Prof. Vasmaghi to one year in prison. She remained free while her appeal was pending. Then, on 21 October, the Court of Appeals upheld the lower court’s ruling. At the time of writing, Prof. Vasmaghi was awaiting a summons to begin serving this sentence, in addition to the previous five-year suspended sentence.

Your Excellencies, the Committee on Academic Freedom is extremely concerned that this prominent scholar is in danger of being sent to prison for merely exercising her right to freedom of expression, which Iran’s own laws and Constitution purport to protect. For decades, Prof. Vasmaghi has been subjected to harassment and surveillance at the hands of certain sections of the government of the Islamic Republic because of her academic research and publications. Prof. Vasmaghi’s treatment is a clear violation of Iran’s domestic and international obligations to refrain from placing restrictions on and retaliating against nonviolent expression. The fact that her books are banned in Iran and that she is barred from leaving the country also infringes upon her right to academic freedom and exchange. We respectfully ask that you drop all charges against Prof. Vasmaghi and reverse the unjust prison sentences against her. Requiring her to serve these sentences is especially harsh given her disability, near-blindness, for which she requires the assistance of her husband, and in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit Iran’s prisons particularly hard, compromising the health and welfare of numerous prisoners. We also request that you lift the ban in Iran on her previous publications, which make significant contributions to our understanding of

women's rights and family law in Islam. We appeal to you to ensure her safety, and allow her to continue writing and publishing on these important topics of scholarly interest.

Thank you for your attention. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor, University of Southern California

cc:

His Excellency Dr. Hassan Rouhani, President
The Honorable Mahmoud Alavi, Minister of Intelligence
The Honorable Mohammad Javad Zarif, Minister of Foreign Affairs
The Honorable Takht-Ravanchi, Permanent Representative of Iran to the
United Nations
The Honorable Michelle Bachelet, The United Nations High Commissioner for
Human Rights
The Honorable Javaid Rehman, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of
Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran
The Honorable Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human
Rights Defenders
The Honorable Tlaleng Mofokeng, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to
Physical and Mental Health
The Honorable Nils Meltzer, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other
Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment