

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES ASSOCIATION IN ACTION

Committee on Academic Freedom: Current Concerns and Initiatives

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According to its Mission Statement, MESA's Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) is tasked with monitoring violations of academic freedom in the MENA region as well as in North America. Violations of academic freedom are often understood as comprising governmental attempts to prevent scholars from conducting scholarly research, publishing their findings, delivering academic lectures, and traveling to international scholarly meetings. However, CAF often addresses cases in which professors and academic researchers irrespective of discipline are harassed, persecuted, dismissed or detained for their peaceful professional or personal activities, particularly if they encourage respect for human rights. In some instances, the committee has also protested state violence that has deliberately targeted educational institutions' buildings or campuses.

Over the years, our letters have addressed most countries in the MENA region, in addition to raising concerns about developments in universities at the federal and state or provincial levels in the United States and Canada. While the number of letters that CAF writes is far from a perfect indicator of the gravity of the threats to academic freedom in any given country, there are lessons in the patterns that we find through our work.

For several years, the Turkish government has been the target of a large number of our letters owing to the dire situation for academics (and many others) in the country. As a result, twice in the last five years CAF has selected a Turkish group as recipient of the annual Academic Freedom Award. In 2012, the Committee recognized The Initiative for Solidarity with Detained Students (Tutuklu Öğrencilerle Dayanışma İnisyatifi), an organization that was created to engage in legal assistance and advocacy

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on behalf of the hundreds of students, both undergraduate and graduate, who had been arrested by the Turkish government because of their academic research or the exercise of their rights of free speech and association. At that time, we could not have predicted that the situation would deteriorate further, but in early 2016, President Erdoğan [branded the signatories of the now-famous Academics for Peace petition as traitors](#). Thereafter, arrests, threats of physical violence and death, as well as other serious forms of intimidation against the signatories escalated dramatically. Worse, following the attempted coup in July 2016, universities were closed and thousands of faculty members were dismissed in what developed into a wholesale purge of the educational sector. In response, CAF chose the signatories of the Academics for Peace petition for the 2017 Academic Freedom Award. CAF also prepared a number of informational documents to assist Turkish academics seeking to find work outside Turkey. In 2018, the situation remains dire as a series of Emergency Decrees continues to underpin massive violations of academic freedom and human rights.

Another part of the region of particular concern is the Gulf. A number of disturbing cases of arrests of dual nationals have occurred in Iran, while academics involved in broader human rights advocacy work have been detained and subjected to lengthy jail sentences in Bahrain and the UAE. Our concern and letter writing regarding Gulf cases also extends to U.S.-linked campuses there, which have not always upheld their commitment to academic freedom.

Turning to the United States, the most disturbing development has been the growing online harassment of members of the Middle East Studies community. While past attempts at intimidation were generally limited to faculty, we now increasingly have examples of students – both graduate and undergraduate – who are targeted by online slander and threats for their campus activism, often that related to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. In order to highlight these threats at home CAF chose Palestine Legal, an organization that documents and provides support in cases of suppression of advocacy for Palestinian rights, as the recipient of its 2017 academic freedom award. In the meantime, CAF's North America wing has continued its work on the problem of online harassment. In spring 2018 it issued [a resource guide for students as well as for college administrators](#) on perhaps the most vicious of the online initiatives, Canary Mission (CM). Canary Mission is a secretive, non-academic political organization that uses its website to engage in defamatory attacks against college students who advocate for Palestinian

rights, against student and other organizations engaged with this issue, and against faculty who teach or speak publicly about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. CM's tactics threaten a student's right to pursue an education without harassment; they also threaten the employment prospects of those whom the website targets by name, including undergraduate and graduate students, as well as untenured and contract faculty. CAF strongly believes that educating U.S. college and university leaders, faculty, and students about Canary Mission's goals, methods, and impact is an urgent priority, and we continue to strategize to find ways to combat CM's insidious work.

Finally, CAF protested "The ISIS Files," which *The New York Times* began to publish in installments on April 4, 2018. The nearly 16,000 documents that reporter Rukmini Callimachi relied on for this series were removed from Iraq by her and her team without permission of the relevant Iraqi authorities. She then used these materials for a series of articles and podcasts in complete disregard of the myriad legal, professional, ethical, and moral issues involved. Our letter, which decried the illegal removal of these materials as well as their use in unredacted form, also insisted that they be returned to Iraq. This letter echoed the concerns we had expressed in 2007 when CAF gave its academic freedom award to Dr. Saad Eskander, then director-general of the Iraq National Library and Archive. Eskander had carried on a multi-year struggle to defend and preserve Iraqi cultural heritage, including demanding the return to Iraq of the millions of documents that were "removed" by U.S. forces in the wake of the 2003 invasion. While the *NYT* failed to respond directly to our letter, we have recently learned that the Iraqi government has affirmed its demand that these documents be returned, and expects the *NYT* will comply.

As in other cases of CAF intervention, we remain hopeful, even as our past experiences suggest that such battles around the myriad forms of academic freedom violations are, and are likely to remain, difficult, long, and often distressing in outcome.