

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

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20 November 2024

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid al-Maktoum
Vice-President and Prime Minister, United Arab Emirates
Twitter: @HHShkMohd

HE Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan
Minister of Interior, United Arab Emirates
Twitter: @SaifBZayed

HE Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan
Minister of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates
Twitter: @ABZayed

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 regarding the recent life sentence imposed on Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith, a distinguished economist and former lecturer at the University of Paris IV Abu Dhabi. Dr. bin Ghaith has already endured eleven years of imprisonment for exercising his fundamental rights to academic freedom and free expression.

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 2800 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.

We are deeply disturbed by the Abu Dhabi Federal Appeals Court's decision in July 2024 to sentence Dr. bin Ghaith to life imprisonment, along with 40 other defendants, on dubious charges of "establishing and managing a clandestine terrorist organization." These new charges, which appear to lack substantiation, compound the injustice of his original 2017 conviction, for which he was sentenced to ten years in prison merely for expressing academic views on social media. The original charges, which included "committing a hostile act against a foreign state" and "posting false information," stemmed from [tweets](#) in which Dr. bin Ghaith offered scholarly critique of the Egyptian regime's response to a local event and raised concerns about due process in his own legal proceedings.

The circumstances surrounding the recent trial again raise serious concerns about due process and judicial independence. We are particularly troubled by reports that the proceedings were conducted behind closed doors, that defense lawyers were denied access to case files and court documents, and that defendants were allegedly coerced into providing false statements. Such procedures violate basic standards of judicial fairness and academic freedom.

The conditions of Dr. bin Ghaith's confinement at Al-Razeen prison are equally disturbing. There [are credible](#) reports that prison authorities have consistently denied him necessary medication for high blood pressure and proper medical care, despite his deteriorating health conditions, which include visual impairment and mobility issues. Furthermore, there have been [reports](#) of ill-treatment at Al-Razeen prison, including torture and sexual harassment, which represent clear violations of international human rights standards and the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

Your Highness, Your Excellencies, this pattern of persecution of scholars who express views contrary to official positions presents a serious threat to academic freedom in the UAE. Additionally, the timing of these most recent trials is particularly troubling, as your government launched a new wave of charges against 84 individuals in December 2023 - during its hosting of COP28 - in what appears to be retaliation for their formation of a civil society advocacy group in 2010. Among those facing these new charges are several prominent figures already serving extended prison terms on dubious charges, including the internationally recognized human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor, about whom we have written several times ([17 August 2021](#), [1 May 2019](#), [18 January 2019](#), [30 May 2018](#), [6 April 2018](#), [29 March 2017](#)). [The defendants also include numerous](#) individuals previously convicted in the controversial "UAE94" mass trial of 2013, many of whom continue to be detained despite having completed their original sentences.

We have raised our concerns about the treatment of Dr. bin Ghaith on a number of occasions (See our letters of [17 August 2021](#), [7 January 2019](#), [5 April 2017](#), [22 August 2016](#), and [21 August 2015](#).) Dr. bin Ghaith's case is emblematic of a broader campaign to silence independent academic voices and critical scholarly discourse. The imposition of a life sentence for what appears to be protected academic speech sends a chilling message to scholars and researchers throughout the region. We therefore call upon your government to release Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith immediately and unconditionally, and drop all charges related to his peaceful exercise of academic freedom and free expression. Until then, we urge you to provide him with access to necessary medical care and to family visits without

Re: Dr. Nasser bin Ghaith

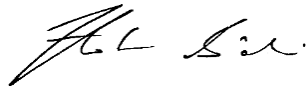
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further delay. Additionally, we call upon your government to investigate allegations of torture and mistreatment in Al-Razeen prison. Finally, we urge you to take concrete steps to protect academic freedom and independent scholarly inquiry in the UAE

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Ash Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School



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

cc:

Yousef Al Otaiba, Ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States

Mohamed Abushahab, Permanent Representative of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations

Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, MENA section

Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders

Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression