

New York University departments call for boycott of Abu Dhabi campus after UAE denies visas to professors

Josh Varlin
13 November 2017

The faculty of New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute voted unanimously to sever relations with NYU's satellite campus in the United Arab Emirates after the UAE denied visas to three NYU professors, most likely as a result of religious or political discrimination, or both, constituting a gross violation of academic freedom.

NYU professors Mohamad Bazzi and Arang Keshavarzian were both slated to teach courses at NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), NYU's portal campus in the UAE capital, before Emirati authorities denied them the security clearance necessary to get work visas. Both professors are US citizens born overseas with Shia Muslim backgrounds. A third tenured professor was also denied entry, but has decided not to publicly disclose his or her identity.

Bazzi is an associate professor of journalism and was the Middle East bureau chief for *Newsday* during much of the Iraq War. He has written articles critical of UAE ally Saudi Arabia, including the brutal Saudi-led war in Yemen. Bazzi was born in Lebanon. Keshavarzian is an associate professor of Middle Eastern studies whose research and teaching has focused on Iran, including domestic Iranian politics. Keshavarzian was born in Iran.

Both professors, who are US citizens, were denied entry after disclosing on their visa application forms that they are Shia Muslims. The UAE, which is ruled by a reactionary Sunni monarchy, requires that visa applicants disclose their religion and sect, and NYU reportedly told both professors to comply with this request.

The UAE has refused to explain why it denied Bazzi and Keshavarzian the right to teach at NYUAD. In an

Op-Ed in the *New York Times*, Bazzi says that the UAE "security apparatus denied my security clearance most likely for sectarian reasons."

It cannot be excluded that, especially in Bazzi's case, political motives are also at work here. The UAE is heavily involved in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, with Abu Dhabi contributing a military brigade to the campaign. In an August 2016 article in the *Nation* magazine titled "Why Is the United States Abetting Saudi War Crimes in Yemen?" Bazzi notes that, "warplanes from the Saudi-led coalition have bombed a Yemeni school, a hospital run by Doctors Without Borders and a potato-chip factory, killing more than 40 civilians, including at least 10 children."

A letter signed by a majority of the NYU Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute senior faculty (including Bazzi) also hints at possible political motives, saying, "if [the decision to deny visas] was for reasons of religious affiliation ... or because of our colleagues' writing and research, it would represent a significant threat to academic freedom on that campus."

The letter, which is addressed to NYU President Andrew Hamilton, asks Hamilton to "do everything in your power to convince the authorities in Abu Dhabi to grant Profs. Bazzi and Keshavarzian visas and correct this situation."

Other organizations and NYU departments have also protested the UAE's decision to deny visas to Bazzi and Keshavarzian. NYU's Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (MEIS) sent a letter to Hamilton, noting: "While a number of NYU faculty—as well as our graduate student Alya El Hosseiny, who had been awarded a Humanities Research Fellowship for dissertation work by the NYU Abu Dhabi

Institute—have been denied entry to the UAE in recent years, this is, we believe, the first time that tenured members of the NYU faculty whom NYU Abu Dhabi had invited to come teach there have been prevented from doing so.”

The MEIS letter concludes, “Until NYU’s leadership addresses these issues seriously, the majority of the MEIS faculty, in solidarity with our colleagues and students, feel compelled to call on NYU faculty based in New York to consider refraining from teaching or participating in academic events at NYU Abu Dhabi until such time as all NYU faculty and students are free to do so.”

Faculty at NYU’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study likewise voted to encourage faculty to boycott NYUAD.

Ten members and officers of the NYU chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) condemned the move in a letter, calling it “a gross violation of the AAUP’s basic principles of academic freedom.” The AAUP letter also denounced NYU’s lackluster response, which mostly consists of “stock statement[s]” which “are widely seen as merely evasive.”

The Middle East Studies Association (MESA), which promotes “scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa,” wrote a letter to Hamilton expressing its “deep concern” over the denial of visas. The MESA letter notes, given the “increasingly repressive” atmosphere in the country, “It is therefore plausible that UAE security officials were unhappy about something that Professor Bazzi and/or Professor Keshavarzian may have said, written or taught concerning UAE or Gulf region politics.”

Hamilton’s response came in the form of a reply to MEIS faculty. While he called the visa denial “very troubling to me” and expressed sympathy for the disruption forced on Bazzi and Keshavarzian, he shouldered off any responsibility falling on NYU: “I know of no universities that can guarantee to their scholars that they can cross any border at any given time to teach or conduct research, because the matter is out of the institutions’ hands.”

The strongest words in the letter are left for the promised boycott of NYUAD, which he calls “premature” and would instead “punish NYUAD’s students and faculty colleagues.”

This is not the first time the UAE, abetted by NYU, has infringed on academic freedom. NYU professor Andrew Ross, a labor studies scholar, was barred from entering the country in March 2015. NYU alumna Kristina Bogos was initially denied entry to the UAE, only to be permitted to enter as a tourist under surveillance.

Ross’ and Bogos’ “crimes” against the UAE government were their research into labor conditions, notorious in the Gulf region, where most of the construction work is done by heavily exploited migrant workers.

The horrific conditions facing migrant workers in the UAE are bound up directly with NYUAD, which was constructed with such exploited labor. After a scandal erupted in 2014 regarding working conditions at the NYUAD construction site, then-NYU President John Sexton argued that the conditions were due to construction contractors, not NYU itself.

But, as the media noted at the time, the building contractor was hired by one Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak. It was Mr. Mubarak who persuaded NYU’s Board of Trustees to build the campus and saw to it that the government of Abu Dhabi gave the university \$50 million to do so. Mr. Mubarak is now a member of the NYU Board of Trustees, its governing body that has final say on all university decisions.

Since the beginning, NYUAD was marred by this sordid deal with the reactionary sheikdom and barbaric working conditions there. Even before construction began, many noted the authoritarian nature of the UAE regime and the prospect of limitation on academic freedom. It has become clear that such concerns were well-founded.

NYU students who are seeking to defend democratic rights and oppose corporate influence at the university from a socialist perspective should contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality club at NYU.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact