

“There’s a pattern here that NYU doesn’t want to acknowledge”

Interview with Mohamad Bazzi, NYU professor barred from the UAE

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Mohamad Bazzi, an associate professor of journalism at New York University (NYU), was denied the security clearance and work visa needed to teach at NYU’s campus in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Along with Bazzi, Arang Keshavarzian and a third, unnamed professor were denied entry.

Bazzi and Keshavarzian are both US citizens born overseas with Shia Muslim backgrounds, and had to report this information to UAE authorities to be authorized to work at NYU’s Abu Dhabi campus. Under the Trump administration, the United States is attempting to forge an anti-Iranian alliance with reactionary Sunni Persian Gulf oil monarchies, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The UAE’s alliance with Saudi Arabia and the US government is exemplified by the Saudi-led, US-backed war in Yemen, which has led to a humanitarian catastrophe, including famine and a cholera epidemic, in the impoverished country. One of the stated aims of the war is combating Iranian influence in the region. The UAE has contributed troops and air support to this near genocidal war that has left millions on the brink of starvation.

Human Rights Watch recently accused the US government and other Western powers of painting a “rosy picture” of conditions in the UAE, and seeking to “paper over a much darker reality—of disappearances, torture, and detainee abuse, and their own potential complicity in these abuses.”

The same charge can be leveled against NYU, which opened its Abu Dhabi campus in 2008—the first major step in its quest to construct a “Global Network University” after receiving a \$50 million grant from the emirate, which also agreed to cover all costs of planning, building and operating the facility. The university has been tight-lipped about what other UAE petrodollars have flowed into its coffers.

In return for cash from the UAE’s rulers, NYU’s administration has assisted in providing a veneer of respectability for a reactionary and repressive monarchical regime, sacrificing the rights of its own academic staff in the bargain. Also as part of the deal, Khalid Al-Mubarak, an influential adviser to the ruling family and the public face of its worldwide investments, sits on NYU’s Board of Trustees.

Bazzi has criticized the Saudi-led war in Yemen, and Keshavarzian has written on the politics of Shia-led Iran. It is almost certain that their scholarly and journalistic publications, their family religious backgrounds or some combination was behind the refusal of UAE authorities to allow them to teach in the country.

After the *World Socialist Web Site* first reported on the visa denials, Professor Bazzi agreed to be interviewed over the phone. This

interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Josh Varlin: Could you start by telling me a little about your research interests and the courses you teach at NYU?

Mohamad Bazzi: I mostly teach international reporting at NYU to both undergraduate and graduate students, and I teach some courses about the Middle East specifically for journalism students.

As far as my research, I write mostly on the Middle East. I’ve spent the larger part of my journalism career covering the Middle East. I was Middle East bureau chief for *Newsday*, and I covered the aftermath of September 11, parts of the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. I covered pretty much the entire lead-up to the war in Iraq and its aftermath and I was based in Iraq after the US invasion and during the early years of the US occupation.

JV: What was it like being a journalist during those conflicts? Were there things about the wars that you were uniquely situated to see or that others may not know or may have forgotten?

MB: A lot of what ended up unfolding in Iraq post-invasion was expected, and in other parts of the Arab world people were worried about a prolonged US occupation, a de facto partitioning of Iraq, an increase in sectarian sentiment, Iraq becoming a focal point for jihadists—all of those things happened in subsequent years.

There was a short period when there was some goodwill to the US, and that evaporated very quickly. One of my early experiences was writing about the emerging insurgency and the movement against US troops, and that was at a time when the Pentagon and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney and others at the top levels of the Bush administration—this is in the spring and summer of 2003—all these Bush administration officials insisted that there was no organized insurgency against US forces. They would use terms like “these are dead-enders,” and “these are just remnants of the old Ba’athist regime,” and some of them were, but there were also strong signs that there was an organized insurgency—and at that time it was made up mostly of Iraqis, the foreign influence and jihadists emerged a little later.

JV: What was the visa application process like to teach at the Abu Dhabi campus?

MB: My department and I were approached by administrators in Abu Dhabi about offering a class there. I put in my paperwork in the spring of 2017. The applications ask for your religion and sect, and the instructions that NYU provides say that these fields cannot be left blank. On these forms I had to write that I was a Lebanese Shi’ite. I was concerned, mostly based on a previous experience with NYU Abu Dhabi in 2011 and 2012, that my application might be denied, partly

on the basis of disclosing that I'm Lebanese and Shia. I told the administrators that at the time, and explained some of my previous experience with other administrators at NYU Abu Dhabi, and I was told that it should be okay, and that they were hiring new immigration and visa consultants who would be able to deal with the process.

And then it took months—I didn't hear anything, my department didn't hear anything—and then in August 2017 we were told that my application was denied. Then NYU Abu Dhabi appealed the denial, and that appeal was also denied.

JV: You've written articles very critical of the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has the support of the UAE. Do you think that this played a role in you being denied the right to teach?

MB: It's possible. I don't know for sure, NYU doesn't know for sure, because the UAE doesn't provide a reason for these security clearance and visa denials. It's possible that my colleague and I were subjected to an extra layer of scrutiny because we have to list our nominal religious affiliation, which is that we're Shia, and that might have triggered deeper scrutiny of what we've written, maybe even of our social media presence, and certainly articles we've done and our academic research—that might have happened because we had to list ourselves as Shia.

This decision might've been a combination of a sectarian-based, religious-based denial, and a denial based on our work and research and writing.

JV: From the start the Abu Dhabi campus had its critics, some of whom cited possible intrusions on free speech and academic freedom, and at the same time the campus was built using the labor of highly exploited workers. What do you think these issues say about the nature of the NYU Abu Dhabi campus?

MB: There's been a history of problems and concerns since the start of NYU Abu Dhabi, and the initial set of concerns from faculty at NYU were centered around two major areas: The potential limits and threats to academic freedom and freedom of expression, and concerns about labor practices in Abu Dhabi, in the UAE overall and in the Gulf states in general, because there's a long history of labor abuses in the UAE, in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, basically in every state of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Those fears were realized. The initial labor safeguards that NYU said would be in place fell short.

Early on, there was concern about the UAE's record in stifling opposition and dissent, and NYU's president at the time, John Sexton, made extensive promises that NYU in Abu Dhabi would have the same standards of academic freedom that NYU enjoys in New York.

There's been some debate about what defines academic freedom, what qualifies as academic freedom. Some supporters of the administration say that it's absolute academic freedom within the classroom, to be able to teach whatever material scholars want to teach within their classrooms, but I'm not sure if that entirely lives up to the spirit of the original promises, and I'm not entirely convinced that there's absolute academic freedom in the classroom.

JV: I would say that not having the right to teach, denied because of religious background and/or political perspective, falls under academic freedom.

MB: Yes.

JV: What do you think the impact of having Khaldoon Khalifa Al-Mubarak as both a high-ranking official within the UAE government as well as an NYU trustee has on academic life at NYU in Abu Dhabi and/or in New York?

MB: One of the things we were hoping would happen is that NYU

would use the direct line it has to the upper levels of the Abu Dhabi government through his presence on the NYU board to influence and lobby for the reversal of these visa denials, for example. We don't know if that's happened, we don't know if the NYU administration has lobbied him specifically about these visa denials.

JV: What has been the response of the NYU administration to the visa denials?

MB: The response has generally been that NYU can't control the visa immigration policies of a sovereign government, and we often hear the comparison to the US administration, especially the Trump administration. That's true, but NYU has a different relationship with the government in Abu Dhabi than it does with the US government.

We've also heard in NYU's response that these are isolated cases and that there isn't a pattern, whereas exclusionary immigration policies by the US government and especially by the Trump administration are based on a pattern. I would disagree with NYU's interpretation. I think there is something of a pattern in what the UAE has done with its immigration and visa policies. There's a pattern here that NYU doesn't want to acknowledge.

JV: They also denied NYU Professor Andrew Ross in 2015.

MB: Yes, and NYU's response at the time was that Andrew Ross was going to Abu Dhabi on his own, he wasn't asked to go by NYU, he wasn't being sponsored by NYU, and so therefore NYU could not do anything to challenge his denial. He wasn't allowed to board his flight from New York. Our cases are different because we were asked by NYU to go, so that eliminated that explanation, but NYU's response has been similar.

JV: What has been the response of faculty and professional organizations?

MB: Several departments issued resolutions expressing their concerns about this, including our two departments, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies and Journalism. Several other departments and schools joined. The NYU chapter of the American Association of University Professors issued a statement. The Middle East Studies Association's Committee on Academic Freedom issued a strong, well-argued letter to the NYU president and a separate letter to the UAE government.

There's been significant support from faculty, faculty groups, student groups and professional organizations concerned about this pattern.

JV: Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

MB: It's important for faculty and students to think about NYU's policies and policies of other universities that have campuses abroad and think through the implications of these partnerships all around the world and the implications for freedom of movement and academic freedom. That's the lesson I've taken away from my experience over the last few months.



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