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## Interview with Arang Keshavarzian, NYU professor barred from the UAE

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Arang Keshavarzian, associate professor of Middle Eastern Studies 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), last semester. Along with Keshavarzian, Mohamad Bazzi and a third, unnamed professor were denied entry.

Keshavarzian and Bazzi 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 (NYUAD).

For years, the United States has forged an anti-Iranian alliance with reactionary Sunni Persian Gulf oil monarchies, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Trump administration has intensified this strategy.

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.

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.

When the *World Socialist Web Site* first reported on the visa denials, several NYU departments, along with the Middle East Studies Association and the NYU chapter of American Association of University Professors, had issued statements condemning the attack on academic freedom and/or encouraging a faculty boycott of NYUAD.

Since then, the following departments have issued similar statements: Cinema Studies; History; Media, Culture, and Communication; Performance Studies; and Social and Cultural Analysis. The WWSW also interviewed Professor Bazzi in January.

Additionally, NYU President Andrew Hamilton sent an all-faculty email February 9 admitting that NYU was “deficient in our communications to the individuals involved.” He also agreed to limited communication reforms suggested by the Faculty Committee.

The belated and cowardly email, which did not even suggest that Bazzi and Keshavarzian experienced religious, national or political discrimination, committed NYU to nothing beyond notifying faculty promptly when they are denied visas.

In a statement to *NYU Local*, Bazzi said, “I’m disappointed that Hamilton and the Faculty Committee avoided addressing two of the core

issues behind these visa denials: the threat to academic freedom and the Abu Dhabi government’s pattern of religious (and national-based) discrimination.”

The WWSW’s Josh Varlin recently interviewed Professor Keshavarzian on the visa denials.

**JV:** What was the visa application process like, and how did you find out you were denied a security clearance to get a visa to teach in the UAE?

**AK:** In April of last year I was sent some forms from someone who functions as NYU Abu Dhabi’s liaison to facilitate the security clearance process and ultimately getting a residence visa. One document was a UAE governmental form and the other was an NYU Abu Dhabi human resources form. They had the normal battery of questions about personal information and history such as place of birth and parents’ names, but both forms had a question about your religion and your sect.

At that point I reached out to a senior member of the NYU Abu Dhabi administration and asked if I could not answer those questions and I was told that I should fill them out.

They initially told me that it would take six weeks to two months. I submitted the documents in April, by late June or July I hadn’t heard anything so I sent out an email. There wasn’t much of a response until August, and at that point I emailed again asking if they had any additional information. At that point I did receive an email from the main liaison between NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU and he informed me that he would like to talk to me on the telephone and we had a brief conversation in which he told me for the first time that my security clearance was rejected, and then NYU decided to appeal the rejection and this was rejected too. They hadn’t informed me about the initial rejection, and they hadn’t asked me if I actually wanted to appeal the rejection. NYUAD went ahead and did it without my approval, but the appeal was also rejected. I was told that at this point all paths were closed and he was informing me that it didn’t seem likely that I’d be able to go to NYU Abu Dhabi.

**JV:** The UAE, working with Saudi Arabia, is quite opposed to Iran, even justifying its intervention in Yemen on the basis of supposedly countering Iranian influence in the region. You’re a US citizen, but you were born in Iran. Do you think that played a role in the visa denials?

**AK:** It could have. The UAE won’t inform us why the security clearance was rejected. As you point out, given the regional political context at this moment and the strained relations between the UAE and Iran—to say the least—being Iranian in any form, even if I am a US citizen, is probably treated as a red flag. Having said that, there are many Iranians who live and work in the UAE—the majority of them in Dubai. I do not know of any Iranians who teach or work at NYUAD.

**JV:** Do you think the fact that you've written on Iran and Iranian society in your capacity as an academic played a role in the visa denials?

**AK:** I hope not, because that would be a pretty straightforward case of violating fundamental academic freedoms. But it's clear to me that some people at NYU—to my face and behind my back—have contemplated or thought that the reason I didn't receive my security clearance or that Professor Bazzi didn't was because of the kind of work, writing, teaching that we do that focuses on Middle East politics. If Emirati officials had investigated my writings and if that was the grounds for not allowing me to teach at NYU Abu Dhabi that's deeply troubling.

**JV:** Could you speak on the international religious or sectarian context of the visa denials?

**AK:** What was striking to me, especially after the fact, was that even the NYU Abu Dhabi human resources form has these questions about religion and sect. I've asked a few times in these past few months why they ask these questions, I've never received an answer. I've pointed out that if NYU Abu Dhabi is collecting all this data and information about the faculty and students going to NYU Abu Dhabi—they know how many Christians, Muslims, Jews, Shias, Sunnis are there—they could actually look and then see if those who have been rejected over these past seven-eight years are disproportionately Shia Muslims or another religious group. I find it disconcerting that they're collecting this information on the one hand and then doubly so that they deny that it's happening on religious grounds without evaluating their assertion.

The other issue that's troubling is that in the process of filling out the security clearance forms the senior NYU Abu Dhabi official with whom I was in contact asked me if my name divulges my religious identity, which clearly indicates that he was thinking in those terms and was wondering if through my name my religious identity would be signaled. So this notion that we've been hearing the past few months from NYU President Andrew Hamilton and others that it's absolutely not the case that religion and sect is relevant in this case rings hollow to me. NYU officials are clearly concerned with people's religious background.

**JV:** Could you also speak on the geopolitical context of the visa denials?

**AK:** It's clear for anyone who follows the news from the region that, as you just pointed out, this very close relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has deepened in the last five or six years, especially after the Arab uprisings in 2011, which threatened to disrupt authoritarianism in the region. Obviously they have a sense of threat from Iran has added to this, and in the last few years, the UAE and Saudi Arabia together have taken a very strong and belligerent stance vis-à-vis regional shifts and struggles. You see it most notably in the case of Yemen, but we also see it in various other areas.

What's equally troubling is that, within the UAE, as well as in Saudi Arabia, we see a pretty staunch crackdown on any dissident voices, whether it's activists in the UAE who are mobilized around human rights, labor issues and so on.

**JV:** Much of the media coverage of the visa denials has been focused on the religious aspect, with both you and Professor Bazzi being of Shia Muslim background. Do you think the possible political factors have been understated in the discussion?

**AK:** Yes, to some extent. To me they're not mutually exclusive. I think this is a bit of a false binary, clearly both of these issues could have been related in the minds of the immigration offices.

It points to the basic fact that, for many decades, even going back before the creation of the United Arab Emirates, mobility into and out of the UAE has been used as a form of control, whether it's been deporting people out of the country, removing people's citizenship and expelling them, or highly regulating the movement of people into the country—for political or social reasons. Movement and mobility is a key political instrument of the UAE government.

This is nothing new, we've known this when the campus was created, everyone knew this—or should have known when they began this enterprise of creating a Global Network University. I don't think pleading ignorance is an option for decision makers at NYU.

**JV:** Even at the beginning of the Abu Dhabi project, many people raised questions of academic freedom, as well as labor abuses in the building of the campus, which was built with a large grant from the UAE government, and you have Khaldoon Khalifa Al-Mubarak on the NYU Board of Trustees. Do you think that these issues are connected, in terms of the labor issue, the academic freedom issue, as well as the way the campus was proposed and eventually built?

**AK:** I think that these are all interrelated, in that we are talking about an absolute monarchy that's illiberal in many senses, and it uses movement and mobility as a form of control.

I'd argue the reason that the US is heavily involved in these monarchies and has been for many decades is not despite them being illiberal but because they are illiberal. NYU got a huge plot of land on an island for free and without any consultation with the citizens of the UAE, it received funding, and it had this campus built incredibly quickly and cheaply, because of a highly exploitative labor regime.

In these past few months I have heard of many other cases at NYU, happening to non-tenured faculty, to non-US citizens, to graduate students, all people who are so vulnerable that they can't speak out. So the reason that Mohamad Bazzi and I felt that we should speak out about this is because we are US citizens and we have tenure; it provides us a degree of protection where we can actually share our story with the broader campus. These sorts of things have been happening for several years, but people have been less secure in publicizing them, or even talking and trying to take their cases to NYU's administration.

**JV:** What has the response of the NYU administration been?

**AK:** This, for me, has been fundamentally what's disappointing: the NYU administration's response—and lack thereof. It's been five to six months, and to this day Andy Hamilton has never picked up the phone or emailed me or Mohamad Bazzi. He writes that he supports our scholarship and so on, but he's had five to six months to just reach out and talk to us about what we experienced and learn about the consequences for us, our research, and our families. And if he feels sorry he could say something, but he's never once reached out directly.

There are actual implications for me when it comes to having my security clearance rejected. At this moment, it's not clear if I'm on some sort of UAE blacklist—which by definition would mean not just a UAE blacklist, but a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) blacklist; and if I am, what that would mean for my ability to fly to or even through Dubai, Kuwait, these sorts of places. I have not tested this at this point, but it has real implications for me and for my research. I'm working on a project on the politics and history of the Gulf, so at this point, it's not clear if I'm able to go to the UAE or any of the other GCC countries. I have family members who live in the GCC. So there are real concrete implications for me that the university has not even tried to learn or acknowledge, let alone address them.

**JV:** In our view, attacks on academic freedom are bound up with broader attacks on democratic rights, including the Trump administration's attacks on immigrants as well as measures by Facebook and Google to censor opposition, such as Facebook deleting the accounts of Palestinian activists at the request of the Israeli government. Do you see the visa denials as connected to other issues of democratic rights?

**AK:** I absolutely agree that these issues—the movement of ideas, the movement of people—fundamentally touch on the ability of people to govern themselves, think for themselves and gain access to information—and ultimately to organize. This issue is a microcosm of these larger regulations that you have pointed to.

Since you raised the issue of rights of Palestinian activists, another

challenge for the Global Network University is NYU Tel Aviv. We know that the Israeli government has announced that it has a list of 20 organizations that are viewed as supporters of BDS [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions] and deemed them as threats, and we know we have many students—undergraduates, graduates and even faculty—who are members of these organizations and contribute to these organizations. I would be surprised if, in the next four to five years, we don't have cases where a student or faculty from NYU trying to travel to teach at NYU Tel Aviv does not run into problems gaining entry.

**JV:** What do you think about the recent protests in Iran? The *World Socialist Web Site* has analyzed these protests as part of a broader process of working-class resistance internationally.

**AK:** These protests are significant because many of the people who took to the streets, who protested—many of the towns that saw the fiercest clashes between protesters and the security forces—were in smaller towns that are usually off the radar and not heard from. But these people and their demands are part of a large and growing set of movements—and I'll put that in plural, movements—of different segments of Iran's society, including the working classes, that have, over the past 15 years, continuously tried to challenge various aspects of what we would call this neoliberal turn in the economy that is accompanied with a hollowed-out state. Whether it's people in the industrial working class who've challenged their employers not paying them or being shifted into temporary contract workers, whether it's teachers and nurses, more professional groups who have organized and mobilized around various workplace issues, these movements have often morphed into demanding the creation of independent, autonomous associations and unions. It is fundamentally about people seeking to represent themselves and using that to hold their rulers accountable.

How far this will go? It's too soon to tell, but the sorts of demands that they're making are fundamental, they would fundamentally transform power in Iran. These are not simple matters for the political elite to paper over.

**JV:** Do you have anything else you would like to share with our readers?

**AK:** The very phenomenon of the Global Network University is part of the transformation of higher education into a profit-making enterprise. And that transformation has a whole series of contradictions. On the one hand it wants to hold onto some kind of these norms of transparency, exchange, freedom of expression, but it's driven by an interest in the bottom-line, and there are fundamental tensions there. In some cases, the challenges that NYU is facing and these sites are facing are a byproduct of the tensions and paradoxes that are baked into this attempt to take American universities and internationalize them with an eye toward moving capital and labor around in certain ways that benefit certain groups rather than others.



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