

Faculty protest hits NYU's coverup for UAE in Matthew Hedges case

Josh Varlin**30 November 2018**

In an open letter to New York University President Andrew Hamilton, academics at NYU condemned the life sentence handed down to British academic Matthew Hedges by the United Arab Emirates for supposed espionage. While Hedges has since been granted clemency following international outrage, his case underscores the contempt with which the UAE government—with which New York University has deep ties—views academic freedom.

The hearing that sentenced Hedges to life imprisonment was five minutes long, contained no evidence presented by UAE authorities to substantiate the charges, and did not include an argument in his defense. Hedges, a PhD student at Durham University conducting academic research on Emirati diplomacy, was arrested in May as he was preparing to leave the country.

The letter, signed by 214 faculty and PhD students as of this writing, demands that Hamilton condemn Hedges' arrest, sentencing and detention; institute a forum and committee on academic freedom across the university and its international network, including the NYU campus at Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) in the UAE, and take measures to protect academic freedom from governmental interference.

Despite the blatantly unfair trial and the urging of faculty, the initial response of the administration (prior to the granting of clemency) was to insist that academic freedom is safe at NYUAD. In an email, Hamilton's office said, "Those teaching and studying at the NYU Abu Dhabi campus engage in rigorous intellectual discussion, scholarly research, and academic analysis every day with no restrictions."

A subsequent statement by NYU left open the possibility that Hedges was guilty, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. "It would of course be a

significant concern to us if someone engaged in routine scholarly activity were imprisoned for it," said spokesman John Beckman. "However it is important to note that we do not have any information regarding the case of Mr. Hedges beyond what has been publicly reported."

John Archer, a professor of English at NYU and one of the organizers behind the open letter, noted: "To state that we only have information on Matt's case from public reports implies he may have done something wrong. It is eerily similar to [President Donald] Trump's response to the [Jamal] Khashoggi murder. ... President Hamilton is out of step, then, with what is known."

The university's response was both cowardly and dishonest. It allowed defenders of the monarchical regime of the UAE to cite NYU in defense of the regime's antidemocratic actions and whitewash NYU's role in bolstering the country's image. Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a prominent UAE academic and flunky of the regime, tweeted, "Commenting on the case of #MatthewHedges NYU president, Andrew Hamilton said: Those teaching and studying at the NYU Abu Dhabi campus engage in rigorous intellectual discussion, scholarly research, and academic analysis every day with no restrictions."

In reality, NYU faculty and students know that academic freedom is by no means guaranteed at NYUAD. NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute severed ties with NYUAD last year after the UAE barred three professors from teaching in the country. The professors, including Mohamad Bazzi, associate professor of journalism, and Arang Keshavarzian, associate professor of Middle Eastern studies, were almost certainly prevented from teaching due to their religious backgrounds and/or political views.

Despite widespread outrage from faculty and academic organizations at this restriction on academic freedom, the NYU administration covered for the UAE government then as it does now.

In 2015, the UAE prevented NYU Professor Andrew Ross, a labor studies scholar and a signatory of the Matthew Hedges open letter, from entering the country due to his research on labor conditions in the Gulf monarchy.

Bazzi spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the imprisonment of Hedges and the response of the NYU administration to the faculty protest. He noted that it was unclear if the UAE granted Hedges clemency in response to widespread criticism, or if rescinding the sentence had been planned all along. Either way, however, the regime's actions sent a chilling message.

"I would argue that the criticism contributed to this [granting of clemency]," Bazzi said. "Some might argue that this was the UAE's intention all along, to set an example and get a long sentence on the record, as a warning to other academics and researchers and as something of a slap in the face to the UK government and [Home Secretary] Jeremy Hunt in particular."

"There are a lot of indications that this case and the prosecution of Hedges did not live up to international standards," Bazzi explained. "The sentence was hurried, and he didn't have legal counsel present when the sentence was handed down. There were also reports that he was forced to sign a confession in Arabic during the investigation—he doesn't read or speak Arabic. We've now seen the UAE share these video clips Monday morning before announcing the pardon showing Hedges speaking and at one point he's asked for his rank in MI6 [British foreign intelligence] and he says he was a captain, and that's a bit of a farce because that rank doesn't exist in MI6, it doesn't have military ranks. ..."

"There's a lot of evidence out there to counter the idea that Matthew Hedges was a spy. It's disappointing that NYU chose to focus on this idea that the NYU leadership doesn't have enough information about the case. It's a legalistic way to avoid the central question raised by this case."

The NYU administration's subservience to the UAE government is bound up with the creation of NYUAD itself. The UAE gave NYU \$50 million to establish the campus, and Khaldoon Khalifa Al-Mubarak, a leading

member of the government, now sits on NYU's Board of Trustees. Mubarak hired the building contractor that enforced brutal working conditions during the construction of the campus.

NYU's student newspaper, the *Washington Square News*, notes that between 2012 and 2018—based on what appears to be a partial data set—the UAE gave over \$78 million in gifts or contracts to NYU. This sum nearly equals all major foreign gifts to Columbia University, and surpasses Cornell University's total. WSN notes that the Department of Education report supplying this data "shows that [the NYU-UAE] relationship is saturated with million-dollar contracts, on top of a \$10 million monetary gift from the Executive Authority of Abu Dhabi in 2014."

NYU has pocketed these immense sums while remaining silent on the central role being played by the UAE in the horrific Saudi-led, US-backed war in Yemen—which has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands from starvation, relentless bombings and the spread of diseases like cholera, while leaving 14 million on the brink of famine.

The backing that Hamilton and his operatives have given to the UAE's attacks on academic freedom has only bolstered the regime in this blood-soaked campaign.



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