

New York University faculty defends academic freedom against NYU's ties to UAE

By Josh Varlin
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Dozens of New York University faculty gathered December 3 in a forum to voice their concerns over the NYU administration's response to the case of Matthew Hedges, a British academic who was imprisoned for months in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on trumped-up charges. Despite an open letter—presently signed by 224 faculty, staff and PhD students—demanding NYU President Andrew Hamilton condemn Hedges's arrest and take measures to secure academic freedom, NYU continues to cover for the UAE government.

Given NYU's role in the UAE, where it has a degree-granting campus in Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), the silence of the administration amounts to complicity. The UAE gave \$50 million to the construction of the NYUAD campus, and a high-ranking member of the UAE government sits on the NYU Board of Trustees. His fellow board members are an ignominious group of New York City multimillionaires and billionaires, including several who sit on the boards of imperialist think tanks like the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

After an international outcry, including the NYU faculty letter, Hedges was hastily pardoned and allowed to leave the UAE. He has since explained to the *Telegraph* that after he was sentenced, he was interrogated yet again, prompting suicidal ideation. While he was imprisoned, his captors administered both tranquilizers and stimulants to him without proper medical supervision, leaving Hedges suffering from withdrawal symptoms in the UK.

At the faculty forum, titled “NYU, UAE, & Academic Freedom,” three faculty members who had experience with NYUAD and the UAE government spoke, followed by contributions from the floor. The common theme was that academic freedom was anything but sacrosanct in both the UAE and at NYUAD, and that the NYU administration is fully aware yet continues to claim otherwise.

The first of the main speakers was Lauren Minsky, assistant professor of history, who taught at NYUAD from its opening in 2010 until this year. She was followed by Andrew Ross, professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and director of American Studies, who was barred from the UAE in 2015 due to his research on labor conditions in the country. Arang Keshavarzian, associate professor of Middle Eastern Studies, was the last of the main speakers. Keshavarzian was denied a security clearance by the UAE last year and was therefore unable to teach in the country.

While the arrest of Hedges was a nodal point in the attacks on academic freedom by the UAE, it was hardly the first time academics had been harassed for their work by the federation of sheikdoms. Minsky provided a timeline of the sordid NYU-UAE “partnership,” including how NYU walked back on promises of academic freedom shortly after the campus began operations by creating a facile distinction between academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Minsky described how, after her arrival in the UAE, she noticed how the boxes containing her research materials had been opened and everything was in disarray. “They had clearly gone through everything,” she noted. Some of her husband's English- and Hebrew-language books were confiscated. She described extensive “direct harassment of faculty teaching at NYU Abu Dhabi,” Minsky noted that she was followed for hours in her car—with her infant on board—by an unmarked vehicle that she believes was associated with the regime's security services.

Harassment has only escalated over the past couple of years, Minsky told the meeting, with the campus suddenly declared a “public space” by the government. All public events that people unaffiliated with NYU could attend had to be approved. “From my perspective, it's almost like the [UAE] government is taking over the institution, and I don't say that lightly,” she explained.

Ross emphasized that genuine academic freedom extends to speech that is critical of university administrations and extends beyond the walls of the university. “One of the duties or obligations of our profession’s members is to share our knowledge and opinions with the public,” he said.

The secrecy around the Memorandum of Understanding between NYU and the UAE—which has never been made public—was the “original sin” of NYUAD he said: “The ‘original sin’ of non-transparency determined the character of these operations from there on. ... That original sin has made it all the more likely that something very, very bad will happen sooner rather than later at NYU Abu Dhabi. And in my mind that’s almost a certainty.”

Ross also noted that this was hardly exclusive to NYUAD, referencing how Israeli law now prohibits entry to members of pro-Palestinian groups, including groups with an organizational presence at NYU. Thus, it isn’t legally possible for all NYU students to study at NYU Tel Aviv, something also noted by a subsequent student speaker of Palestinian origin.

Keshavarzian stressed that the UAE was an absolutist monarchy from its founding in 1971 through to NYU’s decision to construct a liberal arts college in the country, and remains so today. However, the UAE’s authoritarianism made NYUAD possible, including the brutal exploitation of labor to construct the campus. “NYU entered into this arrangement because of the UAE’s illiberal system, not despite it,” Keshavarzian explained.

Regarding the denial of his security clearance in 2017, Keshavarzian asked: “Was I denied entry because I was born in Iran and I was asked to identify myself as a Shiite Muslim, or was I denied entry because of what I teach, research or write? I do not know, and allegedly the UAE government won’t tell NYU. ... If it was the former, then it is a simple case of discrimination based on my ethnicity; if it is the later, it is a simple and gross violation of academic freedom.”

The general response of the NYU administration to faculty having their academic freedom and democratic rights restricted by the UAE was to sweep it under the rug. Keshavarzian noted that most of the communication with him regarding his security clearance denial came in the form of phone calls rather than e-mails, and that Hamilton “has never once picked up the telephone to talk to me, or Mohamad [Bazzi, another professor denied a security clearance by the UAE in 2017].”

The three speakers were followed by contributions from the floor. While the faculty had invited members of the administration, including Hamilton and Provost Katherine Fleming, they did not attend.

Toward the end of the discussion, John Archer, a professor of English and one of the organizers behind the open letter to Hamilton, proposed a motion that was amended and then supported overwhelmingly in a resolution that called on the NYU administration to “uphold the principles of academic freedom at NYU’s global sites and protect anyone who has experienced explicit threats to their academic freedom and personal safety” and to make public NYU’s Memorandum of Understanding with the UAE.

The resolution proposed a monitoring committee of faculty, staff and students, independent of the NYU administration, to oversee these demands and to create a secure whistleblowing website that would air “concerns about threats to or violations of academic freedom, violations of policies regarding labor, and the like” by the UAE government.

A representative of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality addressed the meeting at the end and stressed how the UAE is cracking down on academic freedom during its bloody intervention in Yemen and how attacks on democratic rights are taking place internationally—including the repression of the French “yellow vest” protests and the attacks on immigrants at the US-Mexico border. If democratic rights are to be defended at NYU and elsewhere, it must be based on an international strategy oriented to the working class, he stressed.

The IYSSE at NYU will discuss these issues at its next meeting, “ NYU Administration Backs the UAE: The Way Forward to Defend Academic Freedom, ” which will be on Tuesday, December 11 , at 6:30 p.m. in room 910 of the Kimmel Center at NYU. Faculty, students, staff and others seeking a socialist strategy to defend democratic rights are invited to attend.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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