



April 17, 2023

### **AIS Letter Regarding Dr. Maziar Behrooz, at San Francisco State University**

We write on behalf of the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and its Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) to express our shock and dismay over the serious violations of academic freedom and freedom of expression in the decision made by San Francisco State University to launch an investigation into the teaching of historian and professor, Dr. Maziar Behrooz. This is a clear case of censorship, and an arbitrary and unjustified investigation, which even without further action, threatens critical thinking at the very heart of academic inquiry and is an unacceptable violation of Professor Behrooz's protected First Amendment rights.

AIS is a private, non-profit academic society founded in 1967 to support and promote scholarship and research on Iran and the Persianate world at the international level. An independent, non-partisan, non-political, and multidisciplinary international community, the association publishes *Iranian Studies*, the principal journal in the field. AIS membership includes over 500 scholars, students, and academic and professional researchers. We are committed to encouraging the free exchange of ideas and freedom of speech, both within and beyond the geographical boundaries of Iran and the Persian-speaking world.

Professor Maziar Behrooz is a historian of the Islamic world, who has been teaching courses on its history for decades. In the fall of 2022, Professor Behrooz was teaching his usual course on the history of the Islamic world between 500 and 1700 CE, in which he regularly shows images depicting the Prophet Muhammad. However, in this instance, after showing such an image, one student complained to Professor Behrooz, informing him that such a practice was against the student's beliefs. Professor Behrooz explained to the student that this was not the case among many other Muslims, and that professors have the right to determine the content of their courses. The student nonetheless reported the incident to the Chair of the History department and other administrators, which led to SF State's "Equity Programs & Compliance" office to open an official investigation into the matter in March of 2023.

Far from violating a religious or other precept, of which Dr. Behrooz is being accused, such illustrations represent the rich and diverse history and civilization of Muslims around the world and, as such, serve an important pedagogical purpose. Indeed, among the Shi'a Muslims, images of the Prophet Muhammad are not only permissible, but constitute a popular practice. Such images can be readily purchased in the open market; families often exhibit such images in their homes, while others might don gilded renderings as necklaces.

Depicting the Prophet Muhammad, as evidenced in the works of untold numbers of scholars of Islamic studies throughout the world, does not constitute a religious or other violation. Rather, investigating an instructor for showing such images, which are often produced by respected artists and scholars and revered by Muslims worldwide, demonstrates unfamiliarity, if not ignorance, of the breadth, diversity, and richness of Islamic and Persian art history, and the long history of depicting such images in regions of the world with majority Muslim populations. Launching an investigation into such teachings constitutes the true violation of an esteemed professor's reputation and fundamental freedoms. In addition, we hold firm to the belief that among a university's greatest responsibilities is creating and maintaining spaces for critical thinking, teaching the diversity of religious and cultural interpretations, and educating the many faces of people's socio-cultural lived experiences in all religious and cultural traditions.

We note that discrimination in the forms of xenophobia, racialization of others, and Islamophobia violate the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion that San Francisco State University seeks to protect. Equally problematic, however, is jeopardizing the crucial First Amendment right to academic freedom and freedom of expression, as well as critical thinking, all in the name of religious or cultural essentialism or other forms of nativism. Intimidating professors in the name of cultural particularism defies every principle of university inquiry and its firm duty to serve as an independent institution for promoting critical thinking. The very nature and tone of the Equity Programs & Compliance office's response to a complaint such as this, in the form of an investigation, rises to the level of First Amendment violations by producing a chilling effect on free speech, freedom of expression, and academic inquiry. For these reasons, we find the investigation of Professor Behrooz by San Francisco State University's Equity Programs & Compliance office not only ironic, but deeply unsettling.

The Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and its Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) is against censorship and deeply committed to preserving academic freedom and freedom of expression, and to promoting the idea of the university as a site of independent critical thinking for students and professors, alike. Moreover, universities should contribute to informed debates and critical dialogue in the public sphere. We call on San Francisco State University officials to immediately halt the investigation of Professor Maziar Behrooz and further, to take affirmative measures that promote educating students about the critical importance of free speech and expression, as well as the university's inexorable mission to afford this broad space for critical thinking.