

President Carmen Twillie Ambar

Oberlin College

38 E. College St.  
Oberlin, OH 44074

December 12, 2022

Dear President Ambar,

We write to you as subject matter experts and members of civil society whose scholarship and activism focuses on the human rights situation in Iran.

It has recently come to our attention that Oberlin College employs Mohammad Jafar Mahallati as the Nancy Schrom Dye Chair of Middle East and North African Studies. We have also learned that several hundred families of victims of the 1988 massacre of political prisoners in Iran brought Mr. Mahallati's background to your attention in an October 2020 open letter and subsequent correspondences, but that you have taken no credible action in this regard. We write to add our voice to theirs, seeking an impartial and independent investigation.

While the victims' letters to you have set out Mr. Mahallati's background, we believe that it is important to recount the facts.

Mr. Mahallati served as the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations between 1987 and 1989. Although high-ranking position like that have always been awarded to loyalists, it is important to remember that the 1980s were a uniquely ideological and violent era in modern Iran's history and that only those fully adherent to the Islamic Republic's ideology would be trusted with such a position. During his time as UN Ambassador, Iran's government conducted a violent, systematic purge of all political prisoners, killing, at minimum, 3800 people. According to leading human rights organizations and the Parliament of Canada, those killings constitute crimes against humanity under international law. In fact, on July 14 of this year, a court in Sweden relied on international jurisdiction (a concept reserved only for the gravest international crimes) to convict and sentence an Iranian prison official for those killings.

During the period of the killings, Amnesty International publicly issued sixteen Urgent Notices to the international community, alerting the world about the murders, and asking the Iranian government to cease the killings. Anyone with even a passing interest in Iran would have been aware of the killings, and could scarcely have doubted the veracity of the news given the credibility of the source (Amnesty International) and the fact that the killings fit a pattern of violent repression in post-revolution Iran.

Alas, as the United Nations and Amnesty International both note, Mr. Mahallati exerted great effort in denying the killings and portraying them as foreign propaganda. Amnesty International writes, "Mahallati...denied the mass executions in a meeting with the UN Special Representative on the

situation of human rights in Iran and claimed that ‘many killings had in fact occurred on the battlefield.’ Mr. Mahallati also called news of the executions “complete fabrications,” “political propaganda against the Islamic Republic” and “fake information.”

It is our collective expert opinion that Mr. Mahallati knew, or should have known, about the killings taking place in 1988. Even if he did not know (which is a highly unlikely scenario), a reasonable person in his position would have investigated and learned of the killings. Thus, Mahallati’s lies to the United Nations about the killings reveal an intent to mislead the world about the killings in an effort to assist in their cover-up.

Our view is informed by the work of a leading international lawyer who investigated the killings as part of a legal report. Geoffrey Robertson QC has noted that: “in considering the complicity of professionals in crimes against humanity, there is no good reason to exclude diplomats who, knowing the truth, nonetheless lie about them to UN bodies to whom they owe a duty of frankness. Iran’s UN ambassador, Jafar Mahallati, consistently denied the massacres and claimed the allegations were propaganda.” Mr. Robertson goes on to write that “Mahallati is said to be living in the US, where he may be liable to civil action for aiding and abetting torture under the Alien Tort Claim Act.”

The cumulative weight of the evidence is why we were so disappointed to learn that, aside from hiring Mr. Mahallati and granting him tenure, Oberlin conducted a secretive investigation that arrived at his wholly implausible exoneration. To our knowledge, Oberlin spoke to no experts or victims about this issue in its investigation. In fact, the people who had brought forth the allegations against Mr. Mahallati had not even been informed that the investigation was taking place. The process by which this investigation was conducted, and its bizarre finding that Mr. Mahallati had no knowledge of the killings, leads us to conclude that the investigation was an exercise in whitewashing a controversy rather than an attempt to arrive the truth.

Therefore, we respectfully request that Oberlin authorize a third party to conduct a transparent investigation of the allegations against Mr. Mahallati. Your university’s reputation, and your commitment to justice and fairness, depends on it.

Sincerely,

Dr. Shirin Ebadi, Lawyer, human rights activist & Nobel peace laureate

Dr. Azar Nafisi, Writer & former Professor of English literature

Dr. Ladan Boroumand, Historian & Co-founder of Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran