

# Academic Freedom in the MENA Region: Universities under Siege

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### What Is Academic Freedom?

This contribution defines academic freedom in a negative way, relating it to the absence of legal, physical, or structural interference by state or non-state actors in a researcher's personal autonomy, independence and integrity (Grimm and Saliba, 2017: 47). Thus, hereafter, violations of academic freedom refer to any infringements of these freedoms, such as regulatory interference in the governance of higher education institutions, retaliatory discharge of researchers or students, arrests of students or university personnel or more severe infringements of their physical integrity.

### Increasingly under Pressure: Academic Freedom in the MENA Region since 2011

Before 2011, in some countries throughout the Arab world, universities were the safe havens of relatively free speech and, at times, even critical debate in an otherwise dominant picture of heavily censored public political discourse. Many researchers in the Middle East and North Africa had hoped that the spark that lit the wave of mass protests during the spring of 2011 and the political change (where it was manifested) could also reignite the light of academic freedom and end widespread political control over and censorship in higher education and research throughout the region's universities.

Taking stock seven years later, unfortunately, the general trend has gone the opposite way: universities, academics and students throughout the Middle East and North Africa have increasingly been targets of censorship, state interference and political violence since the uprisings in 2011.

Higher education institutions, their students and their staff have not gone unaffected by the broader political developments in the MENA region in recent years. Since the uprisings in 2011, which shook the political landscape of many countries in North Africa and the Middle East, an increasing number of violent conflicts, state collapses and resurgence and continuation of overtly repressive autocracies has defined the political context in which academics work and students learn across the region.

Universities in many countries have been heavily affected by these developments. However, different patterns have emerged across the MENA region.

### Patterns of Contentious Politics and Academic Freedom since 2011

One group of countries devolved into violent conflict (Libya, Yemen, Syria). As a consequence of political violence and state failure, universities were barely able to continue to function in a regular manner. Even where teaching and research activities continued, scholars, as well as students, perceived critical to groups controlling the territory on which universities are located, are subject to intimidation, violence, disappearances, imprisonment and even torture and killings. According to Hattam, the war in Syria alone displaced at least 2,000 scholars (2017), although the estimated number of unrecorded cases is probably much higher.

Another group of countries witnessed relative continuity, despite protests erupting (Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Iran, and most of the Gulf monarchies). In these countries, the situation regarding academic freedom remained more or less stable, however, the persisting restrictions of academic freedom either remained the same or deteriorated in some cases, as governments increasingly tried to tighten their control over higher education institutions. This was especially apparent in Iran, where scholars continued to be persecuted and banned from their work based on their opinions and the content of their work. In Lebanon, however, the level of academic freedom has remained relatively high and universities continue to provide a safe space for open and critical political debate. After the revolution in Tunisia, a similar picture emerged and the level of freedom increased in terms of teaching, free speech on campus and publication.

In a third group of countries (Turkey and Egypt), political mobilization and contestation at universities by scholars and/or students in recent years has led to a systematic crackdown on critical students and researchers. In both countries, students and academics were increasingly targeted for their political involvement in protests or for raising opinions not in line with their governments' policies. Political mobilization and organization in universities, led to a crackdown that resulted in arrests, retaliatory discharges, expulsions, disciplinary measures and more political control over the higher education sector through new regulations and political appointments of management staff at higher education institutions.

### **Academic Freedom under Threat in Turkey**

In Turkey, the restriction of academic freedom in the form of mass expulsions of researchers and students amounts to an attempt to 'cleanse' the public sector (Özkirimli, 2017) of unwanted individuals. Professors and lecturers from nearly all universities have been targets of prosecution due

to alleged ties to the Gülen movement, which the government blames for the 15 July 2016 military coup. The cases of hundreds of Turkish academics who lost their positions at public institutions are just one example of this trend of political backlash against academics who dare to speak out and challenge the positions of the government. Many scholars left Turkey in order to pursue their academic careers abroad. This situation provoked a true exodus of researchers, and, what's more: this 'brain drain' puts independent and free research and teaching at Turkish universities at risk. The UK-based Council for At Risk Academics (CARA) and the German Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, for instance, report skyrocketing numbers of applications by Turkish academics for support grants since 2016.

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The Academic Freedom Monitor verified 111 cases of violations of academic freedom in Turkey, ranging from violence and imprisonment to loss of position and travel restrictions, since the coup attempt in June 2016. This marks an extreme rise in violations compared to the 23 in the period from 2013 until the coup in summer 2016. Furthermore, the Middle East Studies Association has documented hundreds of student arrests.<sup>1</sup>

In March 2018, students at Bogaziçi University in Turkey who peacefully protested against the Turkish army's offensive in Syria were publicly accused of being terrorists by president Erdogan; 11 of them were detained.<sup>2</sup> On 23 March, President Er-

<sup>1</sup> MIDDLE EAST STUDIES ASSOCIATION, COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM (MESANA). *Incarceration of nearly 1000 students*, March 2017 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2017/03/02/incarceration-of-nearly-1000-students>

<sup>2</sup> AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL. *Turkey: Students detained for anti-war protest*, March 2018 [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/8142/2018/en/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/8142/2018/en/)

dogan stated: “we will find these terrorist students and do what’s necessary. The academics in our universities must also be very careful. When we establish a link between these students and the academics we will also do what’s necessary about them.” This exemplifies how much universities have become a central battleground for the Turkish government in their recent crackdown on Turkey’s political opposition.

### Universities as Battlegrounds and Gross Violations in Egypt

In Egypt, the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE) documented 2,138 violations of students’ rights between 2013 and 2016, including 21 extrajudicial killings and 1,181 student arrests. The treatment of universities as military facilities that fall under military jurisdiction illustrates the extent of the campaign to stifle dissent at universities by the state security apparatus in Egypt, since the coup in 2013. According to AFTE<sup>3</sup>, at least 65 students have been referred to military trials since the coup. While arrests at universities have ebbed from 998 in the academic year 2013/2014 to around 21 in the academic year 2015/2016, state control over higher education institutions in Egypt remains at unprecedented levels, with police presence on campuses and riot police permanently stationed at entrances and new restrictive laws governing universities being put in place. In the academic year 2014/15 “alone, 761 students have been arrested and 281 expelled for participating in political activities on campus.”<sup>4</sup>

The tragic case of the Italian researcher Giulio Regeni,<sup>5</sup> who was found dead with marks of extensive

torture on the side of the road between Cairo and Alexandria on 3 February 2016 has led to a diplomatic crisis between Egypt and Italy. On 8 April 2016, Italy recalled its ambassador from Egypt. However bilateral relations have increasingly normalized in recent months, with Rome appointing a new ambassador to Cairo. The Egyptian secret service has since admitted that the Italian PhD student was under their surveillance at the time when he disappeared on 25 January (the day of the fifth anniversary of Egypt’s January 2011 revolution) nearby Tahrir Square, which was heavily secured by numerous Egyptian security forces. In 2018, marking the second anniversary of Giulio’s disappearance, the Italian State Prosecutor claimed that Giulio was targeted by the Egyptian security apparatus because of his work on independent trade unions in Egypt. This case stands out as one example of the most outrageous and horrifying violations by Egyptian authorities against not only academic freedom, but also fundamental human rights, such as the right to a fair trial, the absence of torture and violence, among others.

### Internationalization of Higher Education in the Gulf

An interesting trend to watch is the increasing internationalization of higher education through, on the one hand, sending students abroad to study, or through the opening of manifold satellite campuses by prestigious North American and European universities in the Gulf region and beyond. While at the same time a crackdown on academic freedom continues unabated. Scholars are jailed, as has been the case in the UAE<sup>6</sup> or Iran<sup>7</sup>, and, in some cases, have even found themselves on death row<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> ASSOCIATION OF FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION (AFTE). *Besieged Universities: on student rights in Egyptian public universities post 2013*, March 2017 [https://afteegypt.org/academic\\_freedoms/2017/03/21/12906-afteegypt.html?lang=en](https://afteegypt.org/academic_freedoms/2017/03/21/12906-afteegypt.html?lang=en)

<sup>4</sup> Emilie CRANE LYNN. “Egypt’s Besieged Universities,” *Foreign Policy*, August 2015. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/31/egypts-besieged-universities-sisi-academic-freedom/>

<sup>5</sup> MESANA. *Attacks on academic advisors of Giulio Regeni*, November 2017 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2017/11/13/attacks-on-academic-advisors-of-giulio-regeni>

<sup>6</sup> MESANA. *Concern over UAE trend to silence academics and public intellectuals*, January 2017. <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2017/01/31/concern-over-uae-trend-to-silence-academics-and-public-intellectuals>

<sup>7</sup> MESANA. *Continuing detention without trial of Ahmed Mansoor*, April 2018 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2018/04/06/continuing-detention-without-trial-of-ahmed-mansoor>

<sup>8</sup> MESANA. *Alarm over Iranian Supreme Court upholding capital sentence of Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali on charges of espionage*. December 2017. <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2017/12/21/alarm-over-iranian-supreme-court-upholding-capital-sentence-of-dr-ahmadreza-djalali-on-charges-of-espionage>

## Region-Wide Numbers and Trends

The Academic Freedom Monitor project from the scholars at risk network has verified 48 incidents of violations of academic freedom for North Africa and 183 for Western Asia (Turkey and the Middle East) since 2011. These two regions combined constitute the vast majority of the cases verified by the Academic Freedom Monitor, which has documented incidents from travel bans and losses of positions to enforced disappearances and killings of students and scholars throughout the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the fact that none of these data sources can be taken as systematic and reliable data, due to their limit in scope and methodology (Grimm & Saliba, 2017: 51f.), they do indicate the dire state of academic freedom in the MENA region since 2011, and, especially, the increasing violations of academic freedom in recent years. However, as stated above, this general trend does not mean that the situation in all universities in every country of the MENA region has necessarily deteriorated.

## Conclusion

Violations of academic freedom in all forms, through legal means<sup>10</sup>, retaliatory discharge,<sup>11</sup> travel bans,<sup>12</sup> prison sentences,<sup>13</sup> death penalties,<sup>14</sup> and extra judicial killing<sup>15</sup> have been documented. Since 2011, political activities on and around several universities has intensified, often through independent student unions and protests. Since 2013, we can observe a spike in crackdowns on higher education accompanied by mass arrests. To sum up, the picture looks grim for academic freedom in the Middle East and North Africa, as there is an evident trend of violations and violence.

<sup>9</sup> SCHOLARS AT RISK NETWORK. *Academic freedom Monitor, Incident Index*, <http://monitoring.academicfreedom.info/incident-index>

<sup>10</sup> MESANA. *Sentencing of human rights activist Nabeel Rajab to five years' imprisonment*, March 2018 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2018/03/01/sentencing-of-human-rights-activist-nabeel-rajab-to-five-years-imprisonment>

<sup>11</sup> MESANA. *Dismay over Cairo University's Dismissal of Amr Hamzawy*, March 2018 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2018/03/21/dismay-over-cairo-universitys-dismissal-of-amr-hamzawy>

<sup>12</sup> MESANA. *Deteriorating Academic and Political Freedoms in Egypt*, February 2016, <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2016/02/08/deteriorating-academic-and-political-freedoms-in-egypt>

<sup>13</sup> MESANA. *Continuing detention without trial of Ahmed Mansoor*, April 2018, <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2018/04/06/continuing-detention-without-trial-of-ahmed-mansoor>

<sup>14</sup> MESANA. *Alarm over Iranian Supreme Court upholding capital sentence of Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali on charges of espionage*, December 2017 <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2017/12/21/alarm-over-iranian-supreme-court-upholding-capital-sentence-of-dr-ahmadreza-djalali-on-charges-of-espionage>

<sup>15</sup> Declan WALSH. *Why Was an Italian Graduate Student Tortured and Murdered in Egypt?*, August 2017 [www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/magazine/giulio-regeni-italian-graduate-student-tortured-murdered-egypt.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/magazine/giulio-regeni-italian-graduate-student-tortured-murdered-egypt.html)

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