

# Academia at risk

 Check for updates

**The freedom to research and publish without fear of state retribution is one that many academics take as a given. Unfortunately, this basic freedom is not universal.**

In the current issue, we are publishing a [Comment](#) under a pseudonym. Our author, Ms Constitution, is an Iranian woman writing critically of the Iranian regime. Revealing her identity could lead to serious repercussions from the Iranian government, which restricts the academic freedoms of its citizens. Ms Constitution calls for ‘woman, life, liberty’, and we echo her call here.

As Ms Constitution writes, the call for ‘woman, life, liberty’ is a chant that rings out across Iran today, following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini. Iran’s universities have been central to several protests, and this has led to severe [crackdowns](#) by Iranian state security forces. Members of Iran’s civil society – including academics – have been subject to arbitrary arrests: the sociology professor Saeed Madani was [arrested and imprisoned](#) in May 2022 after he remarked to a citizen news site that the “protests pose a serious challenge to the regime”. Another sociologist, Mansoureh Mousavi, is understood to have been [imprisoned](#) in September 2022 in connection with her research, which focuses on the body and women’s sexuality.

Iran is not the only country where academic freedoms are restricted by an authoritarian regime. In recent years, autocratization has [increased worldwide](#). This frequently means that academics who [criticize](#) the state are at risk. To put a number to this, the international network ‘Scholars at Risk’ [recorded](#) 319 attacks on higher education in 2022: these included 159 cases involving killings, violence or disappearances. The past year has seen large-scale government action against academic freedoms. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has [banned](#) women from entering higher education. In Nicaragua, the government has [forcibly closed](#) universities that were involved in protests against the Ortega government. These events betray a disturbing trend. Evidence suggests that there has been a [sharp decline](#) in academic freedom in the past ten years, across all world regions.



It is important to ask why this is happening. The [rise of autocracy](#) could be linked to increasing disinformation and polarization, but there are no clear causal connections with the [decline in academic freedoms](#). A former academic hostage in Iran, Roland Marchel, [says](#) it is “indeed tempting for certain authoritarian countries to limit researchers’ ... access to the field, in an effort to control information, which, as we know, fosters public debate and the possibility of dissent.” This is echoed in Ms Constitution’s [piece](#), in which she writes of the role of universities as “the last standing stronghold of Iran’s thinning civil society”. Academia is by nature resistant to top-down control. It is innovative, creative and often disruptive. For a regime seeking to control its citizens, institutions of research and learning present an existential threat.

Restrictions on academic freedom impact lives. Patrick Zaki conducts research on gender and human rights, and has been detained in Egypt since 2020. In a [recent interview](#), he spoke of the difficulty of keeping his sanity while imprisoned. Kylie Moore-Gilbert conducts research on politics and protests in the Middle East. She spent two years in prison in Iran on charges of espionage, and has [spoken](#) of the physical assault and psychological

torture she endured. These individual tragedies are tragedies for the entire academic community. We are not safe, until everyone is safe.

The international community has a role in fighting for this safety. For individuals and institutions who want to take action in support of academics at risk, Scholars at Risk has many [opportunities](#). These include writing letters in support of academics who are imprisoned, taking part in research on attacks on academic freedom, and hosting at-risk scholars. We have recently published a [Comment](#) that outlines key steps that the academic community can take to support and integrate scholars fleeing war and persecution, written from the perspective of a former asylum seeker<sup>1</sup>. Some scholarly societies have dedicated committees on academic freedom, such as the [Middle East Studies Association](#) and the [British Society for Middle Eastern Studies](#). These committees monitor cases of human rights violations and take action on behalf of at-risk academics.

There is a very real and frightening need for these efforts and actions. We must not forget the lives of those whose freedom has truly been taken for their scholarly work. Giulio Regeni was a PhD student researching trade

unions in Egypt. In 2016, he was brutally tortured and murdered, and his body was discovered in a ditch on the outskirts of Cairo. Five years later, Egyptian security officials were [charged](#) with his murder. Rahile Dawut was an ethnographer of Uyghur studies when she disappeared in China in 2017. She has been reportedly [sentenced and imprisoned](#) by the Chinese government, but details and her whereabouts remain unknown. The topics of

Regini's and Dawut's research were timely and crucial. As a global community, we are losing some of our most important voices.

At *Nature Human Behaviour*, we commit to amplifying the voices of academics at risk and encourage submissions on this topic. We use pseudonymous or anonymous publication in cases in which it is necessary to protect the lives of our authors and their families. We stand in support of scholars at risk worldwide

and encourage our readership to do the same. The steep decline in global academic freedom, and the many reports of state-led repression of scholars and students, are terrifying alarm calls that we cannot afford to ignore.

Published online: 27 January 2023

## References

1. Al Ajlan, A. *Nat. Hum. Behav.* **6**, 1188–1190 (2022).