

2017

# Free to Think

Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Attacks on scholars, higher education institutions, students, and staff occur with alarming frequency in every region around the globe. The negative impact of these attacks extends well beyond the individuals and institutions directly targeted to include entire academic systems and society generally: that is, the consequence of such attacks is to shrink the space in which every person is free to think, question, and share ideas. Through its Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, Scholars at Risk (SAR) responds to these attacks by identifying and tracking key incidents, with the aim of protecting vulnerable individuals, raising awareness, encouraging accountability, and promoting dialogue and understanding that can help prevent future threats. *Free to Think 2017*, the third installment in SAR's reporting of attacks on higher education communities,<sup>1</sup> analyzes 257 reported attacks in 35 countries occurring between September 1, 2016, and August 31, 2017.<sup>2</sup>

The Monitoring Project collects data on defined types of attacks on higher education. These include killings, violence, and disappearances; wrongful prosecution and imprisonment; loss of position and expulsion from study; improper travel restrictions; and other severe or systemic issues (including, for example, university closures or military occupation of a campus). While they differ across states and regions and by severity and type, these attacks all share a common motivation: to control or silence higher education institutions and personnel. This report focuses on key developments and trends over the reporting year.

### REPORTED ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

SEPTEMBER 1, 2016 - AUGUST 31, 2017

	<b>Killings, Violence, Disappearances</b>	<b>55</b>
	<b>Imprisonment</b>	<b>83</b>
	<b>Prosecution</b>	<b>45</b>
	<b>Loss of Position</b>	<b>32</b>
	<b>Travel Restrictions</b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>21</b>

Total 257

Severe, violent attacks on the university space were again reported over the past year. These include attacks in societies experiencing armed conflict or extremism, where higher education communities may be targeted as perceived symbols of state authority or sources of potential opposition to radical ideologies. These also include targeted attacks against individual scholars or students, generally intended to punish or deter inquiry or expression on disfavored topics. During the past year, large-scale violent attacks were reported on campuses in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Syria, while targeted killings of individual scholars and students were reported in Pakistan, Niger, and Sierra Leone.

In Turkey, state and university authorities continue to take sweeping measures against the higher education

<sup>1</sup> For past editions of *Free to Think*, see <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/bytype/free-to-think/>.

<sup>2</sup> The data in this report reflects only a small subset of all attacks on higher education communities during this reporting period. Given the limited resources available, as well as the scope, variety, and complexity of attacks occurring, a comprehensive accounting is not yet possible.

sector. These include imprisonment and prosecutions; dismissals and expulsions of scholars and students; and restrictions on travel and institutional autonomy. To date, thousands of scholars, administrative staff, and students have been targeted, in apparent retaliation either for their imputed affiliations or for the content of their nonviolent research, publications, teaching, and other expressive activity.

Incidents of violence against organized student expression were reported in increasing numbers this year. In Venezuela, South Africa, Niger, Cameroon, Turkey, and India, state authorities responded to nonviolent student protests with force, including with rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades. In some cases, however, students engaged in violent or coercive conduct, including incidents in South Africa, where campus facilities were damaged, and in the United States, where physical force was used to intimidate and disrupt disfavored speakers on campus.

In Venezuela, as the general political crisis has deepened, university campuses have been sites of conflict and violence, often involving government troops clashing with student protesters.

In many states, authorities attempted to obstruct free inquiry and expression through travel restrictions, including restrictions on entry, exit, and residence, either at home or abroad. Over the past year, Turkey issued decrees stripping thousands of scholars of their passports. Since the decrees also expelled the scholars from their university positions and banned them from working at state institutions in Turkey in the future, the removal of their passports completes the ban on their ability to continue their work, at home or abroad. In China, authorities ordered Uyghur students from China who were studying abroad to return to home; and reports suggested that family members were held hostage pending the return of their student relative. Reported, too, were the imposition of fines, as well as the detention and disappearance of students who did return. Israeli and Thai authorities prevented individual scholars from crossing their borders, while Chinese, Ugandan, and Turkish authorities barred individual scholars from exiting, all apparently in response to nonviolent academic conduct or expression. And, if it is not struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court, the Trump administration's executive orders restricting travel from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen could have severe impacts on higher education, undermining the vitality of U.S. campuses as places of open and diverse cultural and intellectual exchange.

In Central and Eastern Europe, legislative and administrative actions over the last year have threatened the autonomy and continuing operations of universities and research centers, including especially, in Russia, the Levada Center and European University in St. Petersburg, and, in Hungary, the Central European University. Although these incidents do not involve physical harm or imprisonment, they suggest an intent to punish researchers or institutions for their affiliations or for the content of their research, publications, and teaching. As such, they represent serious threats to academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Overall, the thread running through this report is the intent to silence inquiry and discourse. It connects scholars, students, and staff on campuses around the world, mapping a global crisis. Scholars at Risk once again calls on responsible states, higher education leaders, and civil society to respond to this crisis—to reject the use of violence, criminal investigations and penalties, legislative and administrative interference, and other coercive means to restrict peaceful expression, as well as to reaffirm publicly their support for the principles that critical discourse is not disloyalty, that ideas are not crimes, and that everyone should be free to think, question, and share ideas.