

2018

# Free to Think

Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Around the world, attacks on scholars, students, staff, and their institutions occur with alarming frequency. These attacks are carried out by both state and non-state actors, in open and closed societies, using a range of methods. Ultimately, these attacks not only harm the individuals and institutions directly targeted; they undermine entire higher education systems and shrink everyone's space to think, question, and share ideas freely and safely.

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 2018*, the fourth in a series of annual reports analyzing attacks on higher education communities around the world,<sup>1</sup> analyzes 294 reported attacks in 47 countries that occurred between September 1, 2017, and August 31, 2018.<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 campuses). 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, 2017 – AUGUST 31, 2018

	<b>Killings, Violence, Disappearances</b>	<b>79</b>
	<b>Imprisonment</b>	<b>88</b>
	<b>Prosecution</b>	<b>60</b>
	<b>Loss of Position</b>	<b>22</b>
	<b>Travel Restrictions</b>	<b>15</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>294</b>

As in past years, armed groups and individuals continue to carry out severe, violent attacks on higher education communities. These include attacks in countries experiencing extremism or conflict, where higher education communities may be targeted as perceived symbols of state authority or sources of opposition to radical ideologies. These also include targeted attacks against individual scholars or students that are intended to retaliate against or deter inquiry and expression. Over the past year, SAR reported both violent attacks on campuses in Afghanistan, Kenya, Nigeria, and Pakistan, and targeted attacks on individual scholars in India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Yemen.

State authorities use detentions, prosecutions, and other coercive legal measures to retaliate against and deter academic activity, expression, or association. In Iran, students and scholars have come under

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

<sup>2</sup> Given limited resources, as well as the scope, variety, and complexity of attacks, a comprehensive accounting of all attacks during this period is not yet possible.

increasing risk of imprisonment, prosecution, and custodial abuse. And in China, authorities have detained a growing number of scholars and students from the Uyghur minority community in so-called “re-education camps” and other facilities.

SAR has reported at least 875 students killed, arrested, or subjected to other coercive force in connection with their expressive activity. These attacks are part of a long-standing global problem of attacks on peaceful student expression. Such attacks often trigger, and seek justification in, incidents in which some students engage in violent acts, including clashes with opposing student groups and authorities or the destruction of university property. Violent and coercive attacks on student expression threaten the future of strong, nonviolent student movements.

Turkish authorities have continued their campaign of sweeping and targeted actions against the country’s higher education sector, aimed at silencing and removing individuals from academia who have endorsed a petition critical of state military actions or who have been accused of association with groups disfavored by the government. These actions include imprisonments, prosecutions, dismissals, expulsions, and travel restrictions against thousands of scholars, administrators, staff, and students.

Authorities in at least nine countries have used travel restrictions, including restrictions on entry, exit, and residence, to obstruct academic inquiry and expression. These include reports of travel restrictions by state authorities in Russia, Cameroon, and Hong Kong that targeted individual scholars. These also include broad travel restrictions on academic communities in Turkey, where thousands of academic personnel dismissed and banned from public service remain subject to a travel ban; in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where foreign academics face opaque rules that threaten their ability to conduct work at universities there; in Tajikistan, whose government tightened restrictions on academic travel outside the country; and in the United States, where academics and students from Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen are barred from entry as a result of an executive order banning entry of all travelers from those countries.

Also in the United States, provocative off-campus groups and individuals have chosen colleges and universities as the sites of controversial speeches and rallies that frequently result in confrontations. In several cases, these confrontations became violent, endangering students, faculty, and others. Political actors seeking to expose alleged bias among scholars and students have taken a variety of public measures, including the creation of online watchlists, surreptitious audio and video recording, and advancing restrictive and potentially overbroad legislation, all of which have prompted concerns about a shrinking campus space for free, open inquiry and debate.

Governments around the world target universities and other academic institutions through legislative, administrative, and political attacks on their autonomy and operations. These include both new and ongoing cases in Hungary and Russia, where authorities have threatened to close academic institutions and restrict academic disciplines.

The incidents covered by this report are only a small portion of all incidents involving attacks on higher education over the previous year. Nevertheless, they are sufficient evidence of a global crisis of attacks on scholars, students, and other members of the higher education community requiring a robust, global response. Scholars at Risk calls on states, higher education leaders, and civil society around the world to respond to this crisis: to **reject violence and coercion** aimed at restricting inquiry and expression; to **protect threatened students, scholars, and universities**; and 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.

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