Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, Scholars at Risk (SAR) reported targeted killings of scholars and violent attacks against higher education institutions that left scores dead and injured. The withdrawal of United States and coalition military troops and the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan intensified insecurity in the country and left students, scholars, and their institutions in grave danger of physical harm and deprivation of their rights to education and academic freedom.

Afghanistan is bound by national and international legal instruments that provide protections for academic freedom and higher education generally. Afghanistan is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides for the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Article 19), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which provides for the right to education (Article 13) and calls on state parties to "respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity" (Article 15(3)). Full exercise of academic freedom depends also on respect for institutional autonomy, defined as "that degree of self-governance necessary for effective decision making by institutions of higher education regarding their academic work, standards, management and related activities consistent with systems of public accountability, especially in respect of funding provided by the state, and respect for academic freedom and human rights."[1] Afghanistan's constitution contains limited protections for academic freedom, particularly Article 17, which stipulates that "the state shall [...] encourage and protect scientific research in all fields, publicizing their results for effective use in accordance with the provisions of the law," and the right to education, which is provided in Article 43: "Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be offered up to the B.A. level in the state educational institutes free of charge by the state."[2] In 2015, Afghanistan endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, an "inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools,

and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict."[3]

During this reporting period, SAR reported lethal, targeted attacks on higher education communities that resulted in the deaths of more than 55 scholars and students. Some of the attacks from this reporting period fit a years-long pattern of the Taliban and the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (IS-K), an Afghan affiliate of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), targeting higher education institutions, scholars, and students, with a subset of these attacks appearing to target higher education communities with concentrated populations of Hazaras, a persecuted ethnic minority community in Afghanistan. With the US government's announcement to withdraw troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, concerns about the impact of instability and conflict on the local higher education community heightened. The announcement to withdraw troops coincided with increases in Taliban military actions against government forces and in territories under Taliban control.[4] In August 2021, the Taliban gained control of many cities and provinces, even as the US and other governments continued to withdraw troops from the country. On August 15, within hours of President Ashraf Ghani fleeing Afghanistan, the Taliban took over Kabul and the presidential palace prompting thousands of Afghan civilians to rush to Hamid Karzai International Airport seeking flights out of the country. Most were unsuccessful and many, including scholars and students, went into hiding, fearing persecution by the Taliban.

In the year preceding the Taliban's takeover, SAR reported targeting killings of individual scholars, including shootings and one car bombing. On September 14, 2020, unidentified individuals shot and killed **Adam Khan Mulatar**, a professor of Pashto literature at Nangarhar University, while he was on his way to the university.[5] **Mubasher Muslimyar**, a lecturer of Islamic law at Kabul University was killed alongside one other person when an explosive device attached to his car was detonated near the university, on February 18, 2021.[6] On April 24, unidentified gunmen shot and killed **Rafi Osmani**, a lecturer at Peshgam Institute of Higher Education, while he was on his way to campus.[7] In a similar attack on May 1, gunmen shot and killed **Mahmoud al-Rahman**, a professor at the Islamic University in Kabul, in the early morning hours before fleeing the scene.[8] The killings of Osmani and al-Rahman occurred during an apparent spike in targeted attacks that followed President Biden's call for the withdrawal of US troops.

Extremist groups and unidentified individuals carried out violent attacks on campuses and vehicles transporting groups of students and university personnel. On October 24, 2020, a suicide bomber detonated his suicide vest outside the **Kawsar-e Danish Educational Center in Kabul**, which offers tutoring for students preparing for higher education.[9] At least 24 students were killed and 57 injured. IS-K claimed responsibility for the attack. After the bombing, the center reportedly increased security, including by requiring students to undergo body searches, setting up security checkpoints, and instituting a ban on backpacks.[10] On November 2, 2020, at least three gunmen stormed **Kabul University** (KU), where they detonated explosives and opened fire on students and other members of KU's community.[11] The gunmen took at least 20 students and professors hostage, holding them in classrooms while Afghan and US forces arrived on the campus and engaged in an hours-long gunfight. At least 22 people were killed and 50 more were injured. Here, too, the Afghan affiliate of ISIL claimed responsibility for this attack.[12] One week after the attack on KU, an explosive was detonated near the entrance of **Tabesh University**. Sources indicate that the attack targeted a student known to be a leader in the Islamist political organization Hezb-e-Islami. That student was killed and at least five others were injured in the attack.[13] On March 16, 2021, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a **Baghlan University** bus taking students and faculty from the Faculty of Agriculture to the main campus. The driver and a student were killed and at least six faculty members were hospitalized for

injuries sustained from the attack.[14] And on May 29, a remote-controlled explosive device attached to a minibus carrying students and faculty from **Al-Beroni University** detonated, killing at least 4, including 2 lecturers, and injuring 17 others, including the university's dean.[15] No group claimed responsibility for the attacks on March 16 and May 29. Reporting on victims of the attacks indicate that many suffer from complications such as anxiety and insomnia, and fear attending class or taking transport to school, with some abandoning their studies following such attacks.[16]

In at least one incident this year, police and student protesters clashed violently. On April 6, 2021, students from **Takhar University** blocked a highway in a protest demanding the resumption of classes after faculty began a strike over housing issues.[17] Police deployed to the scene, and clashes with students broke out. Live ammunition was reportedly fired, though protesters and a police spokesperson have offered conflicting reports, with the former claiming that police forces opened fire on protesters and the
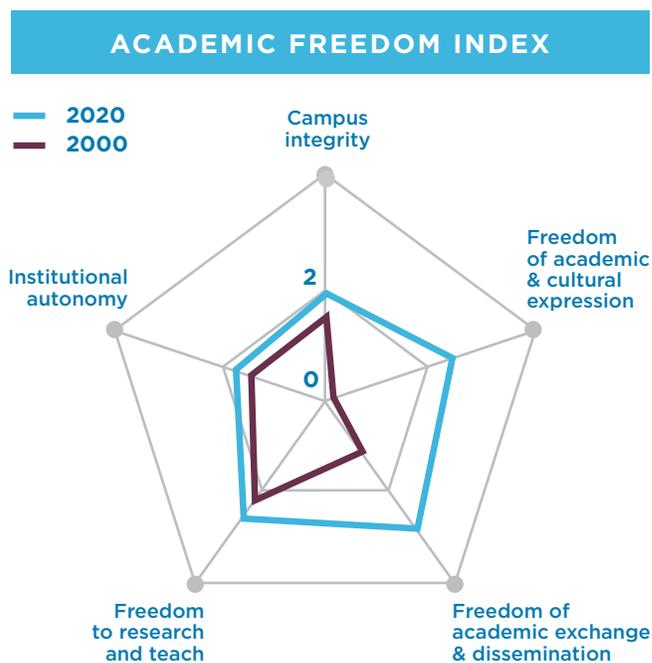
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Freedom of academic & cultural expression
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Freedom of academic exchange & dissemination
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latter claiming that protesters had fired shots. At least four people were reportedly injured in the clashes. Students allege that one student died from his injuries, although the local hospital denied that there were deaths related to
the protest.

The Taliban's takeover of the country raises serious concerns over long–term access to education and academic freedom, especially for female students and scholars.

On August 14, one day before the takeover of Kabul, officials at the **American University of Afghanistan** (AUAF) shut down their campus. They destroyed documents and digital file storage and took down the university's website to protect AUAF community members from retaliatory attacks from Taliban forces. Meanwhile, Victoria Fontan, a professor and vice-president of the university, raced to help students flee the country. Fontan reported that the Taliban had threatened her colleagues and female students.[18] The next day, Taliban soldiers occupied the AUAF campus, replacing the university flag with their own.

On August 17, it was reported that Taliban forces barred female students and instructors from entering the **Herat University** campus.[19] Days later, Taliban officials in Herat ordered a ban on the co-education of men and women at public and private universities in the province.[20]

On August 29, co-education was banned across the country. Abdul Baqi Haqqani, a senior Taliban member appointed as acting minister of higher education, ordered the segregation of female students and faculty from their male counterparts.[21] He later announced that female students would be required to wear hijabs on campuses and that the Taliban would review subjects taught on campus, with the aim of "creat[ing] a reasonable and Islamic curriculum that is in line with our Islamic, national and historical values and, on the other hand, be able to compete with other countries."[22] Taliban officials also told reporters that women would need to be accompanied by a mahram, a male guardian, for any travel longer than two days, raising concern over the ability of female students and scholars to travel long distances for their studies or research.[23] Women in Herat province told researchers with Human Rights Watch and the San Jose State University Human Rights Institute that Taliban soldiers had stopped them in public spaces, including universities, for being outside without a mahram and "barred them from going about their business."[24] While some private universities resumed academic activity on September 6, in compliance with the gender segregation order, most universities remained closed during most of the month of September, apparently due to challenges with implementing the coeducation ban.[25]

The Taliban's takeover of the country is also likely to result in major changes to university leadership, priorities, and values. On September 21, Education Minister Haqqani announced the appointment of Mohammad Ashraf Ghairat as the new chancellor of **Kabul University**, replacing Mohammad Osman Babury, a professor of pharmacognosy and a former Acting Minister of Higher Education.[26] According to *University World News*, dozens of Kabul University professors threatened to resign in protest of the news, and a faculty union demanded the Minister reconsider the appointment of Ghairat, who holds only a bachelor's degree.[27] By late October, the Minister reversed course and replaced Ghairat with Osama Aziz, a senior member of the law faculty at Kabul University.[28] Haqqani also raised concerns when he reportedly stated in a meeting with Kabul University faculty that university graduates from the past 20 years were "of no use" and that those with graduate degrees in "modern studies" are less valuable than those who studied in religious schools.[29]

The financial sustainability of Afghanistan's higher education sector remains a serious concern. Since 2001, international donors largely financed the Ministry of Higher Education and, by extension, public universities.[30] Farhat Asif, the president of the Institute of Peace and Diplomatic Studies raised concerns that foreign donors and partners will likely cut aid to Afghanistan and disengage from higher education institutions if the Taliban implements discriminatory policies against women.[31] Budget cuts will likely have a lasting negative impact on various academic disciplines and women's access to higher education. Scholars of the natural sciences, law, and other disciplines that the Taliban may find out of line with their interpretation of Islam, fear not only for their personal safety but that their research projects and academic departments may also be defunded.[32] Moreover, the lack of funding needed to implement gender segregation may leave countless women without meaningful access to higher education.

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Years of instability, conflict, and the Taliban's rapid return to power has been nothing short of devastating for Afghan society and the country's higher education community. Targeted, violent, extremist attacks on higher education communities, scholars, and students, not only result in the terrible loss of life and

injuries; such attacks target the core values of higher education, including academic freedom, the free exchange of ideas, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility. These attacks raise concern that armed groups seeking power, including the Taliban and IS-K, intentionally target higher education communities both as proxies of governments they seek to oust and because they represent a knowledge-driven, future version of Afghanistan that is contrary to their ideology. These attacks and the policies and practices imposed by armed groups, especially the Taliban, that restrict access to education and academic freedom risk irreparable harm to current and future generations of students, scholars, and leaders of Afghanistan.

SAR calls on state authorities in Afghanistan to take all available steps to ensure the security of higher education communities and their members, protect everyone's right to education and academic freedom, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, religion, or ethnicity, and deter future attacks, including by investigating incidents and holding perpetrators accountable, consistent with internationally recognized standards. SAR calls on higher education leaders and civil society in Afghanistan to help safeguard the higher education space, protect scholars and students, and promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy, by pressing state authorities for greater protection and accountability. SAR calls on states outside Afghanistan, especially those that have withdrawn forces, to maintain their commitment and support for Afghan higher education and civil society generally, so as to preserve as much as possible the gains in higher education made over the past twenty years, including by assisting at-risk and displaced scholars and students.

ENDNOTES

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