SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK SWITZERLAND SECTION

Testimonials of SAR Scholars in Switzerland

Ariel Ruiz Urquiola, Cuba (University of Berne, 2024)

Ever since I was forced to leave Cuba because of political persecution and harassment by the Cuban government and was forbidden to return, I have never abandoned Cuba or my convictions, nor stopped fighting for justice against the violation of my rights, my family's and those of the Cuban people by the current Cuban regime.

I am a biologist, farmer, and environmental activist. When working as a biologist in Cuba, I advocated for sea turtles and natural resources in the prison archipelago and against legal fishing in the area. Furthermore, I was also engaged for the Viñales National Park that has been neglected by the government, the soil depleted and eroded due a lack of sustainable farming. In 2016, I was expelled from Havana University, and in 2018, I was imprisoned by the Cuban government for my engagement for national forest conservation. During this time, I was purposefully inoculated with the HIV virus as medical torture – similarly, my sister also lost her position at the University of Havana and was also subjected to medical torture by the regime. In 2019, I suffered from police repression while demonstrating for LGBT+ rights, and in 2020, whilst speaking on behalf of an NGO at the UN, my speech was sabotaged by Cuba and other regimes.

My sister and I are barred from returning home to our mother due to the regime's arbitrary prohibitions. Thanks to the University of Bern and the SAR program, I resumed my professional career as a biologist in 2024, gaining also a path to continue pursuing justice and honoring my commitment to human rights.

Çağla E. Aykaç, Turkey (University of Geneva, 2017)

I was part of a group of scholars to sign the petition «We will not be a party to this crime!» in early 2016, calling for a return to the peace process in Turkey. Following this, we were accused of treason and hunted down in universities. I received death threats, like many colleagues, and had to be escorted on campus for protection purposes. Eventually, I was "encouraged" to resign from my academic position, after six years of tenure track teaching. I left with a colleague, as we knew our academic carrier in Turkey was over. Integration as a SAR scholar in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Geneva was greatly facilitated by colleagues from different units who organised and invited us to public lectures and seminars, and tried to find additional support to host us. Challenges were bureaucracy, work permits and housing issues; language skills are essential for integration. I continue to research and teach at the University of Geneva, and I mentor students who are in Turkey and cannot leave the country. Uni Geneva website

Oula Abu-Amsha, Syria (University of Geneva, 2014-15 & University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland HES-SO, 2016)

Prior to the civil war in Syria, I was a professor in Computer Science in Damascus. Forced to flee my country in 2012, I moved to Lebanon. In 2013, I secured a scholarship with Scholar Rescue Fund, and my family was preparing to move to Switzerland. SAR support was key to open the door to Swiss academia by facilitating the connection with the University of Geneva first and then with the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland. This two-year fellowship allowed me to update my skills, conduct research and teach. SAR support was essential to help me rebuild my professional network, which is crucial. While not able to continue in the small and highly competitive Swiss academia, I am contributing to refugee education, which is the most meaningful mission for me as an exiled scholar. LinkedIn, Researchgate

Emirhan Darcan, Turkey (University of Bern, 2021-22)

Tasting forced displacement of a researcher is a mixture of sweet and bitter, a feeling I believe many more forced displaced academics and researchers around the world today share. An Istanbulite by birth, I am a European by choice and the values that I uphold, while I became a New Yorker over the years related to my doctoral studies there. After completing my PhD in Criminal Justice, I worked on the Kurdish territory in Turkey. In that context, I have always been very vocal about and have written extensively about preventing violent extremism in the community. Due to Turkey's troubled experiment with secularism and freedom of speech, I started working as a SAR scholar at the University of Bern, whose contribution and that of SAR are crucial for me to continue my

projects and academic studies on preventing radicalism and extremism. LinkedIn, Researchgate

Ayşe Dayi, Turkey (University of Lausanne, 2016-18)

I left Turkey in 2016, after the dismissal from my academic position for signing the petition “We will not be a party to this crime!” and realising that the situation would become riskier for us signatories. After a two-month visiting scholarship in Paris, I came to the University of Lausanne as a SAR scholar. The stay there allowed me to continue my research on women’s health, to publish articles, give talks at conferences and co-organise two international symposia. I also engaged in activities to raise awareness regarding academic freedom in Turkey and to increase hosting opportunities for SAR scholars in Switzerland. Despite the very supportive environment in Lausanne and by SAR Switzerland, my situation as a senior researcher and as a temporary faculty was challenging: I was not eligible for Postdocs and did not qualify for many available grants. An additional limitation was the restriction concerning residence permits for scholars from non-EU countries. Academia profile

Veysel Demir, Turkey (University of Bern, 2017-19 & Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology Eawag, 2020-22)

In the wake of the coup d'état attempt in Turkey in 2016, I lost my position as associate professor in environmental engineering at Tunceli University. My wife also lost her academic position, two lawsuits were opened against us and our passports cancelled. Seeing that many public officers were arrested, we fled with our two children and sought asylum in Switzerland. I found employment for two years at the University of Bern, whose funding was matched by the Scholar Rescue Fund, allowing me to publish in a well-respected journal, improve my research skills, learn German and established contacts with ETH Zurich and Eawag, where I found a one-year position. The stay in Bern greatly facilitated my integration in Switzerland, but finding long-term employment in academia or industry is challenging. LinkedIn, Eawag website, Uni Berne website

Nihat Kotluk, Turkey (EPF Lausanne, 2021-22)

I am one of the signatories, known as Academics for Peace, of the "We will not be a party to this crime!" petition in Turkey that was published in January 2016. Since the release of the petition, we faced many attacks. Through governmental decrees, hundreds of us were fired from our jobs, prevented from finding jobs, denied the right to work in the public and private sectors and our passports were cancelled. Finally, almost all of us have been taken to court. Five years later, nothing has changed in Turkey. Since May 2021, I have completed my postdoctoral research in pedagogy as a Scholar at Risk researcher in EPFL's College of Humanities (CDH), focusing my studies on equity and diversity in engineering education. LinkedIn, Researchgate, EPFL website

Farès Mahmoud, Syria (University of Geneva, 2018-20 & University of Lausanne, 2020-22)

After fleeing the war situation in my home country, the University of Geneva offered me a safe place to work in the Department of Geography and Environment in 2018. Working there was a great opportunity to collaborate with many local and international colleagues, and to learn from the latest scientific discoveries in my field of expertise. At the same time, I could share my experience related to transport networks in Syria through presentations in a series of internal university seminars. The stay in Geneva also stabilised the life of my family, in particular my daughter. Having suffered from moving between countries, she settled down and integrated with colleagues, began to speak French and is making great progress in her studies. Uni Lausanne website; UNHCR Switzerland website (German / French)

Guilain Mathé, Democratic Republic of the Congo (University of Lausanne, 2011-14)

I fled my home country in 2008 following numerous death threats I received related to my research as a political scientist on civil wars and my commitment as a human rights defender. A Scholar Rescue Fund scholarship allowed me to continue my work at research institutions in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Following the outbreak of the civil war there in 2010, I obtained a safe haven at the University of Lausanne's Institute of Political, Historical and International Studies within the framework of Scholars at Risk. With support from University of Lausanne and SAR, I was granted asylum in Switzerland. This greatly facilitated the completion of my PhD, after which I worked at the Geneva Graduate Institute's Small Arms Survey programme during 2019. Academia, LinkedIn

Akram Mohammed, Yemen (University of Geneva, 2022-23)

Besides an educational background, I have a long record of human rights involvement, which began in 2016 when I represented the Swiss-based Ecumenical Alliance for Human Rights and Development at the 31st session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to talk about human rights' violations by Yemeni government and others. In 2018, I gave a human rights training course in Yemen during which I stated that all parties in Yemen committed human right violations, providing examples for each. Thereafter I was arrested by the police, kept at an unknown place for several days and only released after signing some documents, and was informed not to leave Taiz. However, I fled to Switzerland where I participated at the 45th session of the UNHRC in 2020, representing several Yemeni organisations and speaking about severe violations of restricting freedoms and making illegal arrests in Yeme. LinkedIn

Parwiz Mosamim, Afghanistan (Università della Svizzera italiana, 2022)

The collapse of the Afghan government and the take-over by the Taliban in August 2021 put many people at risk, including scholars and journalists. My background as a journalist and scholar who has written on open government, women's representation in public service, positive discrimination policies, democratic values, and peace, made it impossible for me to return to Afghanistan after finishing my MA in Indonesia in August 2021. Luckily, my doctoral research proposal was then already admitted at USI, where I was hired as a PhD assistant at the Institute of Communication and Public Policy, with support of the USI International Relations and Study Abroad Service and funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The support of the SAR Network provided me the opportunity to relocate in a safe place and start my doctoral degree on time, focusing on 'Women's representation in decision-making positions of public administration', with a case study of Afghanistan. LinkedIn, Researchgate, USI website

Engin Sustam, Turkey (University of Geneva, 2016-17)

With a PhD in Sociology from EHESS in Paris, I returned to Turkey in 2012, excited to contribute to the beginning peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdish political movement. Yet, during 2015/16 I lost three academic positions on grounds of my Kurdish and Alevi identity as well as of my academic activities related to the political situation, including the signing of the Academics for Peace petition "We will not be a party to this crime!" against war and violence. After settling in at the University of Geneva, I published a book and newspaper articles, and spoke at conferences. The solidarity and friendship from colleagues were incredibly valuable. Yet, the uncertainty made me move to France where I obtained a fellowship from the PAUSE programme for Paris 8 University until October 2019. My situation in France is precarious, and returning to Turkey is not an option. EHESS website

Sreten Ugričić, Serbia (University of Lucerne, 2017-19)

After ten years at the helm of the National Library of Serbia, the government removed me from office in 2012, accusing me of "supporting terrorism" because I had co-signed an appeal with Serbian writers to stop a political motivated media campaign against an Montenegrin author. The authorities also launched an orchestrated media campaign against me that lasted for months. When the Minister of Internal Affairs, who had publicly threatened to arrest me, became prime minister, I went into exile. In 2016 I could enrol as a PhD student at the University of Lucerne. Employed as a Research Fellow, I could write up my doctoral thesis and share my literary knowledge through lectures in Lucerne and beyond on post-Yugoslav literature and on the relation between politics and art. This was all possible due to a supportive environment at different levels at the University of Lucerne. Uni Lucerne website