SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK
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Scholars at Risk's Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Iran

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of over 600 higher education institutions dedicated to protecting threatened scholars, preventing attacks on higher education communities, and promoting academic freedom worldwide. SAR has Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC (2013), and welcomes the opportunity provided by the Special Rapporteur to comment on conditions relating to civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran), as well as the impacts of military attacks on the country, in relation to the right to academic freedom and attacks on higher education.[1, 2]

This submission focuses on events in 2025, as well as prior years to the extent they help contextualize the current situation.

Applicable Standards

Academic freedom is "the human right to acquire, develop, transmit, apply, and engage with a diversity of knowledge and ideas through research, teaching, learning, and discourse."[3] As both the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and the Special Rapporteur on the right to education have noted, "'academic freedom should be understood to include the freedom of individuals, as members of academic communities (e.g., faculty, students, staff, scholars, administrators and community participants) or in their own pursuits, to conduct activities involving the discovery and transmission of information and ideas, and to do so with the full protection of human rights law.'"[4]

Academic freedom is fully and independently grounded in rights to freedom of opinion and expression, the right to education, and the right to the benefits of science, as articulated, respectively, in International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 19, and International

[1] The views and opinions expressed in this submission do not necessarily reflect those of individual Scholars at Risk Network members, institutions, or participating individuals.
[2] Any identification of individuals in this report is based on verified, publicly available reporting. Consistent with UN policy, SAR endeavors to ensure that its public communications do not expose the identities of individuals, or create or increase any risk that they might face.
[3] Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom, A/HRC/56/CRP.2, available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc56crp2-principles-implementing-right-academicfreedom-working-group
[4] Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, A/HRC/56/58 (A/HRC/56/58), para. 9, quoting Report of the Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of freedom of opinion and expression, A/75/261 (A/75/261), para. 8

Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Articles 13 and 15(3).[5] Iran is a party to both covenants.

Institutional autonomy is a necessary precondition for the fulfillment of academic freedom, and, as UNESCO has noted, "Member States are under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source."[6] Iran is a UNESCO Member State.

Discussion

Academic freedom has been under continuous pressure in Iran for decades. According to the Academic Freedom Index (AFi), Iran is a "completely restricted" environment with respect to academic freedom.[7] This report focuses on recent incidents including:

- Severe restrictions on academic and religious expression targeting students, faculty, and university communities more broadly;
- Severe restrictions on university autonomy, including limitations on on-campus expression and the constant presence of security forces on campus;
- Ongoing imprisonments of a number of academics for nonviolent research and academic activity;
- Violent and wrongful arrests of students and professors, which increased following the attacks by Israel, based on spurious claims that they were involved in spying for Israel.

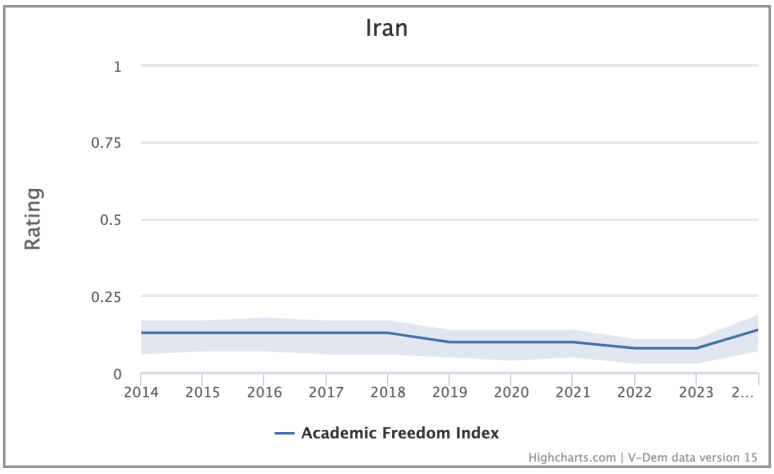

Figure 01: In 2024, the AFi rated Iran as "completely restricted" (0.14).

[5] See General comment No. 25 (2020) on science and economic, social and cultural rights, E/C.12/GC/25 (2020), para. 46; A/HRC/56/58, para. 10; A/75/261, para. 5; R. Quinn and J. Levine, Intellectual-HRDs & Claims for Academic Freedom Under Human Rights Law, Int'l J. of Hum. Rts., Dec. 2014, Vol. 18, Issue 7-8, ISBN: 1364- 2987.
[6] UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997); see also Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, A/HRC/56/57, paras. 48-50.
[7] https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2025.pdf

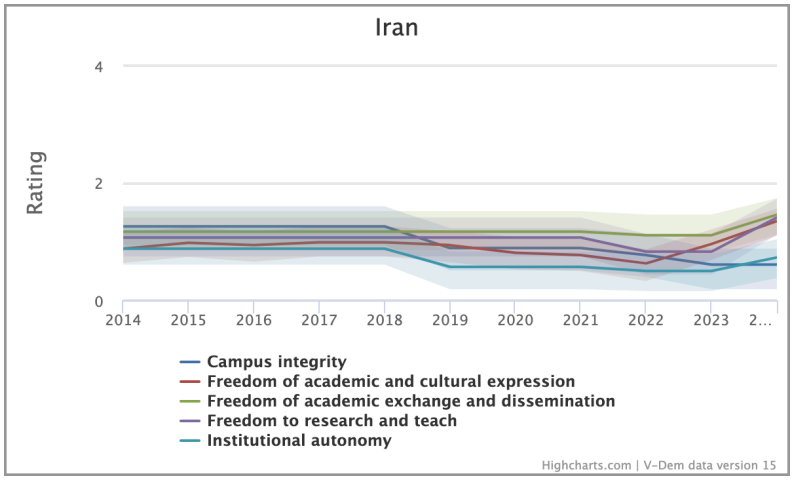

Figure 02: According to the AFi, academic freedom was particularly restricted in Iran with respect to campus integrity – likely due to the increased presence of security forces on campus following the implementation of more stringent hijab regulations in April 2024.

The situation for academic freedom deteriorated significantly after the death of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini while in custody of Iran's "morality police." Her death ignited the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, which was met with escalating repression targeting students, faculty, and university, as documented in *Free to Think 2023*[8] *and 2024*.[9] In June 2024, following Iran's presidential election, the country's leadership made promises to restore a degree of university autonomy and to review the cases of suspended students and dismissed faculty. These promises went unfulfilled. According to the UN, state repression intensified rather than eased. Women continue to face surveillance, physical violence, and increasingly harsh penalties for refusing to comply with mandatory hijab laws. The academic community remains one of the main targets of this ongoing crackdown.[10]

The situation of students and academics imprisoned in Iran remains grave. Swedish-Iranian academic Ahmadreza Djalali remains in prison under a death sentence since 2016. Even as concerns mounted that Djalali's execution was imminent, his health deteriorated significantly.[11] On May 8, 2025, Djalali suffered a heart attack. He was transferred to the prison hospital, but was initially denied proper medical care, apparently because it occurred on the weekend.[12] On

[8] https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2023/
[9] https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2024/
[10] UN OHCHR (2024, September 13). Iran intensifying efforts to repress women and girls on second anniversary of nation-wide protests, UN Fact-Finding Mission says. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/iran-intensifying-efforts-repress-women-and-girls-second-anniversary-nation.
[11] Iran International (2024, July 10). Swedish-Iranian academic faces imminent execution in Iran, Amnesty warns. *Iran International*. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202407099581. Djalali's health has deteriorated significantly: "Do something before it's too late". *Dagens Nyheter*. https://www.dn.se/sverige/djalalis-halsa-kraftigt-forsamrad-gor-nagot-innan-det-ar-for-sent/. Committee on Academic Freedom (2025, March 6). Letter protesting the ongoing unjust incarceration of Dr. Ahmadreza Djalali. *Middle East Studies Association*. https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2025/03/06/letter-protesting-the-ongoing-unjust-incarceration-of-dr.-ahmadreza-djalali.
[12] Sweden Herald (2025, May 9). Ahmadreza Djalali Suffers Heart Attack in Iranian Prison, Life at Risk. *Sweden Herald*. https://swedenherald.com/article/swedishiranian-researcher-ahmadreza-djalali-suffers-heart-attack-in-prison.

June 23, 2025, amid twelve-days of armed conflict between Israel and Iran (see below for more details), Iranian authorities transferred Djalali to an undisclosed location; rights groups expressed fears that the move indicated his imminent execution.[13] At the time of writing, Djalali's location remained unknown.[14]

Following the death of former Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash in May 2024, Iran elected a new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, in July 2024. Pezeshkian's election prompted hopes that Iranians would see a greater degree of human rights, including academic freedom. Pezeshkian had campaigned on the promise that he would refrain from imposing headscarf regulations by force, and from using force against university protesters.[15] Any hopes that observers had for openings under Pezeshkian were quickly quelled after he nominated Hossein Simayi Sarraf. As Minister of Science, Research and Technology, Sarraf had been tied to Iran's conservative establishment and had previously been involved in enforcing ideological conformity in universities. Sarraf's appointment was interpreted as an indication that the Iranian government would continue to limit the space for dissent within universities–a prediction that proved accurate.[16] In the leadup to the 2024-25 academic year, students, faculty, and others called for Pezeshkian to fulfill his campaign promises to reinstate students and scholars who had been dismissed for participating in the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement. As of this writing, the reinstatements have not occurred.[17]

Against this backdrop, observers raised concerns about brain drain weakening Iranian universities. At the end of 2024, Iranian officials revealed that, in recent years, 25 percent of university faculty had left their positions, either because they had left the sector or emigrated from the country. While Iranian authorities have primarily attributed the flight of Iranian academics to economic issues (including the impact of international sanctions relating to government policies), others have pointed out that political repression is an equally significant factor.[18]

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[13] Middle East Studies Association (2025, June 30). Letter expressing alarm regarding the imminent risk of execution of Ahmadreza Djalali, Iranian-Swedish scholar on death row in Iran. https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2025/06/30/letter-expressing-alarm-regarding-the-imminent-risk-of-execution-of-ahmadreza-djalali-iranian-swedish-scholar-on-death-row-in-iran. Iran Human Rights (2025, June 23). Concerns Over Imminent Execution of Ahmadreza Djalali Amid Transfer of Political Prisoners From Evin Prison. https://iranhr.net/en/articles/7681/. Amnesty International (2025, June 20). Iran: Growing fears over torture and executions of individuals accused of 'espionage' for Israel. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/iran-growing-fears-over-torture-and-executions-of-individuals-accused-of-espionage-for-israel/.

[14] Margherita Stancati (2025, July 14). Israel Struck a Notorious Iranian Prison. Its Inmates Are Paying a Price. *Wall Street Journal*. https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-iran-tehran-evin-prison-be85fa9a.

[15] Michele Catanzaro (2024, July 9). Iran elects heart surgeon as president: scientists are hopeful. *Nature*. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-02262-3. Ali Arab, Rana Dadpour, Shideh Dashti, and Encieh Erfani (2024, August 20). Iran's presidential election is no breakthrough for reform or for science. *Nature*. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-02708-8. Ali Arab, Rana Dadpour, Shideh Dashti, and Encieh Erfani (n.d.). Presidential Election in Iran: A Reality Check. International Community of Iranian Academics. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1inOKaf3-_jbhGQNAPCeCIw-gvkj07DXK/view.

[16] Iran International (2024, August 15). Cabinet choices signal dark days ahead for Iran's academia. *Iran International*. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202408144109.

[17] Shafigeh Shirazi (2024, October 3). Calls to reinstate students, professors fall on deaf ears. *University World News*. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20241003124507222.

[18] Roohola Ramezani (2024, December 13). Iran's brain drain will not be stemmed by repression. *Times Higher Education*. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/irans-brain-drain-will-not-be-stemmed-repression. Jubin

Beginning in the spring of 2024, Iran's university campuses saw an increased number of police forces, members of the Basij, and plainclothes officers, placed there in order to enforce more stringent hijab regulations passed in April of that year. On November 3, 2024, Iranian security forces assaulted Ahoo Daryaei, a student in the science and research department at Islamic Azad University in Tehran. According to a student witness, the security guards grabbed Daryaei after they saw her without the required hijab. The officers began to beat her and pulled her by her clothing towards a security post near the university's entrance, ripping her top in the process. Daryaei responded by screaming "shameless" and stripping off her clothing. As Daryaei left the university, plainclothes police officers grabbed her and forced her into a car, causing her to hit her head in the process. Following her arrest, Iranian state media sought to discredit Daryaei, announcing that she had a "mental disorder" and that she was being taken to a facility for treatment. To date, no updates have been provided regarding Daryaei's situation. According to rights groups, the government often uses the pretext of "mental disorders" to justify its crackdown on dissenters.[19]

In February 2025, protests broke out at the University of Tehran after robbers shot and killed an undergraduate student, Amir Mohammad Khaleghi, near the university dormitory. Students demanded that university officials do more to ensure their safety on campus. Police responded to the protests with arrests and force. At least four students were arrested, and one student reported a broken nose from police violence.[20]

On June 13, 2025, Israel launched military strikes on Iran, ostensibly aimed at degrading or eliminating Iran's nuclear program. That same day, Iran retaliated with strikes on targets inside Israel, leading to twelve days of armed conflict between the two countries. The violence disrupted higher education and research, both in Iran and in Israel.[21] In Iran, airstrikes damaged university infrastructure and reportedly killed students. Universities suspended classes, evacuated student dormitories, and postponed final examinations until September.[22] International students, including refugees from Afghanistan, fled the country.[23] As the violence

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Katiraie (2025, March 26). Wave of Faculty Exodus Reaches Iran's Major Universities. *Iran Focus*. https://iranfocus.com/iran/53790-wave-of-faculty-exodus-reaches-irans-major-universities/.

[19] SAR Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (AFMP). Islamic Azad University. November 3, 2024. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2024-11-03-islamic-azad-university/.

[20] SAR AFMP. University of Tehran. February 15, 2025. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-02-15-univerity-of-tehran/. Iran International (2025, February 15). IRAN: Protests persist over death of Iranian university student. *Iran International*. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202502152909. Iran International (2025, February 15). IRAN: Protests persist over death of Iranian university student. Iran International. https://www.iranintl.com/en/202502152909.

[21] Rachel Fieldhouse (2025, June 17). Escalating Israel–Iran conflict damages science labs. *Nature*. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-01915-1.

[22] Roohola Ramezani (2025, June 27). Israel's strikes have sent shockwaves through Iran's academic community. *Times Higher Education*. https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/israels-strikes-have-sent-shockwaves-through-irans-academic-community.

[23] Manija Mirzaie (2025, July 25). Afghan academics, students fleeing Iran face bleak future. *University World News*. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250702181302973. Shafigeh Shirazi and Shuriah Niazi (2025, June 19). Foreign students flee Tehran as campuses adopt 'war footing'. *University World News*. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250619014857263. Angela Mary Thomas (2025, June 14). "Will we live?": Indian medical students trapped in Iran plead for a way out as conflict escalates. *Edex*.

escalated, Iran began to crackdown on members of the opposition, arresting hundreds and accusing them of spying for Israel, and carrying out more frequent executions of prisoners.[24] Student activists were among those arrested. On June 14, 2025, Iranian police arrested Motahareh Goonehi (also written Goonei), a student activist who had previously been barred from continuing her studies at Tehran University of Medical Sciences, in retaliation for a social media post that she made criticizing the Iranian government's response to Israeli airstrikes. Goonehi, who had completed a one-year prison sentence in March 2025 after being arrested for her activism, was taken to an unknown location.[25] Similarly, on June 15, 2025, Iranian police arrested Mostafa Mehr Ayeen, an assistant professor of sociology at the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies in Tehran. Ayeen had published an open letter demanding an end to the war, calling for dialogue and for the resignation of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. At the time of writing, Ayeen was being held in Evin Prison in Tehran.[26]

Under conditions of authoritarian rule, such as in Iran, scholars, students, and universities are often among the primary targets of attack. This is because autonomous universities and academic freedom are cornerstones of democracy. They are as critical to a democratic society as a free press or independent judiciary. Scholars and students must be able to teach, research, and learn unobstructed by external interference or intervention if they are to be able to play their vital roles as experts in their fields and active members of civic society.

Conclusion

Scholars at Risk is grateful for the opportunity to present the above information to the Special Rapporteur. In light of the above, we respectfully urge that communications to the UNGA emphasize academic freedom, noting the grave, ongoing pressures on scholars, students, and universities in Iran, as well as the degree to which such pressures damage not only higher education spaces themselves, but also social, scientific, and political progress more broadly.

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https://www.edexlive.com/news/2025/Jun/14/will-we-live-indian-medical-students-trapped-in-iran-plead-for-a-way-out-as-war-escalates-israel.

[24] Arezou Rezvani (2025, July 2). Iran cracking down on people suspected of aiding Israel in war last month. *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2025/07/03/nx-s1-5450291/iran-cracking-down-on-people-suspected-of-aiding-israel-in-war-last-month. Reuters (2025, June 25). Iran intensifies internal security crackdown with executions and mass arrests. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/25/iran-intensifies-internal-security-crackdown-with-executions-and-mass-arrests.

[25] SAR AFMP. Tehran University of Medical Science. June 14, 2025. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-06-14-tehran-university-of-medical-science/.

[26] SAR AFMP. Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies. June 15, 2025. https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2025-06-15-institute-for-humanities-and-cultural-studies/.