

2016

# Free to Think

Report of the Scholars at Risk Academic Freedom Monitoring Project

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Attacks on higher education communities are occurring at an alarming rate around the world, threatening the safety and well-being of scholars, students, and staff. These attacks ultimately shrink the space in which everyone 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 2016* is the second installment in SAR's reporting of attacks on higher education communities.<sup>1</sup> The current report analyzes 158 reported attacks in 35 countries, occurring between May 1, 2015 – where the first edition of *Free to Think* left off – and September 1, 2016. Reported attacks 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 campus).<sup>2</sup> *Free to Think* brings this global crisis to light, with the aim of highlighting the pressing need for increased awareness, enhanced documentation, and greater protection for scholars, students, and other members of higher education communities. Reporting also provides SAR and its partners with a foundation from which to evaluate and address these needs, and it has prompted the launch of working groups and related advocacy on wrongful prosecutions and student expression.

### REPORTED ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

MAY 1, 2015 - SEPTEMBER 1, 2016

	<b>Killings, Violence, Disappearances</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>Imprisonment</b>	<b>39</b>
	<b>Prosecution</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>Loss of Position</b>	<b>17</b>
	<b>Travel Restrictions</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>20</b>

**Total** **158**

The narrative in *Free to Think 2016* focuses on key, negative developments in higher education communities over the 16-month reporting period. Attacks by armed groups and individuals continue to demonstrate the extent to which the university space is not only exposed within societies plagued by conflict, but is also often a focal point for such conflict. Extremists and militants target universities because they see a free, open university space as a threat to their quest for power. Such extremists and militants have committed mass attacks on universities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as targeted killings of individual scholars in Bangladesh, India, Iraq, and Syria.

<sup>1</sup> In June 2015, SAR published *Free to Think: a Report of the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project*, a path-breaking global report documenting 333 attacks on higher education communities in 65 countries between January 2011 and May 2015. To access the report, visit: <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/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.

In Turkey, criminal and administrative investigations were launched in January 2016 against more than 1,100 scholars; many have since been suspended and/or dismissed from their positions, while others have been detained, arrested, and prosecuted. Pressures on the higher education space in Turkey were compounded in July and August, when thousands of higher education professionals were caught up in sweeping actions taken in response to the failed July 15 coup attempt.

In Egypt, thousands of students and hundreds of scholars remain imprisoned, and face the persistent threat of arrest and violence; the latter most recently exemplified by the murder of Italian PhD student Giulio Regeni. At the same time, local and foreign scholars have suffered restrictions on travel and movement apparently intended to limit their research.

Around the world, students who participate in organized, peaceful expression continue to experience violence and arbitrary arrest. In some cases, small groups of students resorted to violence, causing injury and damage to campus property. Significant incidents involving pressures on student expression and movements took place in Myanmar, South Africa, Thailand, and Venezuela.

Although these incidents may differ by target, type of attack, location, and scale, they are part of a single global phenomenon of increasing attacks on higher education, a crisis marked by widespread violence and coercion to silence inquiry and discourse. Responsible states, higher education leaders, and civil society are called to respond to this crisis – to reject the use of violence to restrict peaceful expression, and to reaffirm publicly their support for the principle that critical discourse is not disloyalty, that ideas are not crimes.

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## **SCHOLARS AT RISK**

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### NETWORK

 protection  advocacy  learning

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