

ROUNDTABLE: DISPLACED SCHOLARS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Threats to Academic Freedom are Global, and So Must Be Its Defense

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As I sit down to write the introduction to this IJMES roundtable on threats to academic freedom in the Middle East and the multiple consequences of these threats for scholars from and of the region, I also am reading news about proliferating restrictions in the United States. In Florida, professors are changing their courses due to prohibitions on teaching about race issued by the state's governor and legislature, and under threat of losing their jobs and livelihood if they run afoul of these restrictions. In Minnesota an adjunct art history professor was denied future teaching opportunities and called Islamophobic by her employer for exposing her students to the range of Muslim perspectives on creating images of the Prophet Muhammad. At Harvard the former head of Human Rights Watch was initially denied a fellowship, seemingly due to the organization's reporting on Israeli human rights violations. And these instances are just a small sample of the anti-academic freedom news. They serve as a reminder that threats to academic freedom are global.

Even as it is necessary to recognize that academic freedom is under attack around the world, it also is vital to attend to the varieties of kind and severity of these attacks, and to the different vulnerabilities of differently located scholars. This roundtable emerges from the activities of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) Global Academy, an effort to “sustain research collaborations and knowledge production between scholars from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and their counterparts outside the region.”¹ The authors are all scholars in the Global Academy and bring their personal experiences to bear on their analyses of the state of academic freedom in the Middle East and North America. They describe and evaluate multifaceted threats to academic freedom. Both direct government action (notably the firing of dissident academics) and circumstances of war, violence, and economic upheaval work to limit academic freedom. Reflecting on these diverse circumstances, the authors also offer suggestions, and exhortations, for ways to overcome at least some of these barriers to research and expression.

The essays approach the question from a multiplicity of starting points. Nihat Celik situates the shrinking autonomy of Turkish universities in the context of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) efforts to establish political hegemony in Turkey. Selin Bengi Gumrukcu also understands AKP repression of academic freedom as central to its political strategy and reflects on the resistance to this repression among Turkish academics. Utku Balaban encourages us to think about changes in the status and freedom of universities in relation not only to political parties, but also to trends in industry and the business community. He further reflects on the devastating personal impact of his choice to be a resisting

¹ MESA Global Academy, “MESA Global Academy Mission,” <https://mesaglobalacademy.org/about/mission> (accessed 21 August 2023).

scholar. Evren Altinkas's contribution begins from the position of exile, making the case that displaced scholars should be recognized for their skills and their contributions to increasing diversity in the North American and European academy. Katty Alhayek and Basileus Zeno offer a reflection on displacement as method, arguing that autoethnography is a crucial tool through which displaced scholars can contribute to decolonizing displacement and migration research.

As dire as the current moment appears, threats to academic freedom are not new, either in the United States or in the Middle East. Roundtable contributions provide important historical analysis of limits to academic freedom in Turkey. Balaban describes the "purge of progressive scholars" from Turkish universities, undertaken under the guise of fighting communism, after the 1980 coup. The use of the claimed threat of devious political forces to limit scholarly activity is certainly a familiar part of American history, with the multiple red scares over the years. Celik notes that the dismissal in the 1980s of hundreds of academics, along with thousands of civil servants, led the International Labor Organization (ILO) to sanction Turkey. These dismissals were eventually deemed unlawful by Turkish courts, but this past decision clearly did not impede the current government from similarly moving against independent-minded scholars. Gumrukcu traces the evolution in AKP efforts to control university spaces and personnel.

And what are the consequences of widespread violations of academic freedom? At the broadest level, consequences include the curtailment of individual careers and scholarly opportunities and also include significant loss of scholarly knowledge and intellectual community. More specifically, circumstances in which academics are under threat can reveal heretofore hidden divides among people. Balaban recounts his conversation with a fellow academic, a biologist focused on the lab and not "politics," who could not understand that speaking up might be part of his scholarly responsibility. For Balaban, being a signatory of the Academics for Peace letter meant losing his job, his ability to remain in his country, and many friends. As Celik notes, those who do not lose their positions are often able to remain by engaging in self-censorship, a condition that diminishes both academic life and public life more broadly. Academic silence radiates outward. Yet, Gumrukcu reminds us, silence is not the only response to these attacks. She describes the efforts of faculty at Boğaziçi University to resist the AKP-imposed rector, in part by standing outside, every day, holding signs that read: "We do not accept, we do not give up."

Precairety is an enduring and itself multifaceted consequence of attacks on academic freedom. Precarity also is a condition that undermines academic freedom—it is both consequence and cause. And, as the roundtable contributions illustrate, it is distributed across the global academic landscape. Under conditions of growing authoritarianism, precarity becomes a weapon in the hands of governments who wish to control erstwhile independent institutions. As Gumrukcu describes, the arrests of thousands of students after the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the firing of hundreds of professors for signing the Academics for Peace petition affirmed that the academy was not a space for free expression.

As people sought safety and freedom from these circumstances, they also entered into new kinds of precarious conditions. As Altinkas puts it, these scholars are still "at risk," even as the character of those risks has changed. Having left a situation of political threat, scholars displaced into the North American academy find themselves thrust into the widespread precarity of short-term contracts and adjunct positions, along with the particular challenges of visas, limited access to funding opportunities, and failures to recognize the skills and accomplishments of displaced scholars. Alhayek and Zeno emphasize that the precarity of displacement poses a direct threat to academic freedom. They highlight how this precarity extends to the evaluation of the scholarship of these academics, sometimes in the form of rigid disciplinary boundaries that reject creative methodological approaches and analytic consideration of academics' displacement experiences.

In addition to diagnosing the problems of how displaced scholars are treated in the North American academy, Alhayek and Zeno chart an intellectual pathway to fight back against

these limits, aiming explicitly not only to change the experience of displaced academics, but also to transform the academy. At a moment when talk of decolonizing is widespread, they challenge North American academics to move beyond rhetorical support for such a move to incorporating it into all aspects of academic practice. Alhayek and Zeno emphasize the necessity of valuing methodological diversity in such decolonization, and highlighting what they call “betweener autoethnography.” Altinkas insists that the presence, and importantly the secure presence, of displaced scholars in the North American and European academy contributes to a positive remaking of the academy. Supporting academic freedom not only requires defense against specific attacks on academic inquiry and speech, but also requires creating an academy where more scholars can thrive. The failure to take up the challenge not only harms displaced colleagues, but also deprives the academy of their insights and contributions.

MESA’s Global Academy is a small contribution to what must be a wider effort at building a truly global academy. The essays in this roundtable underscore that such an academy must work against intellectual apartheid, and must create mechanisms to challenge both immobility and repeated forced movement (whether because of political exile or job insecurity). Making a truly global academy requires courage. Courage to acknowledge the contributions of people trained in different systems and settings. Courage to challenge entrenched disciplinary norms that value only limited approaches and perspectives. Courage to refuse silence in the face of political pressure. The benefits of exhibiting such courage—of not accepting and not giving up—accrue to us all.