

**Scholars at Risk's Submission to the  
Third Cycle of Universal Periodic Review of the  
Islamic Republic of Iran**

United Nations Human Rights Council  
34th Session

## Introduction

1. Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of 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 Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, to comment on conditions relating to higher education in Iran.
2. As part of its advocacy work, SAR monitors and analyzes attacks on higher education around the world, including within Iran.<sup>1</sup> During this UPR period, SAR has received reports from colleagues within and outside Iran, as well as from media, describing overall pressures and attacks on higher education within and outside the country as a result of state and university authorities' actions and/or policies.
3. Scholars, students, and higher education institutions in Iran face significant pressures, both from government and higher education actors, which threaten individual academic freedom and the ability of the higher education space to function in a free and open manner. Among the most severe pressures are criminal sanctions including arrests, prosecutions, the death penalty, lengthy prison sentences, and inhumane custodial treatment, as well as dismissals, violence, and bans on political and social media activities, to retaliate against or restrict the peaceful exercise of the rights to academic freedom, including its constituent freedoms of thought, opinion, expression, association, and travel.

## Applicable legal standards

4. Iran is bound by several applicable international human rights instruments, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), of which Article 19 guarantees “the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of [one’s] choice.”
5. Under Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which Iran is a party, States “recognize the right of everyone to education” and “agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms,” and that education “enable[s] all persons to participate effectively in a free society.” ICESCR Article 15 provides that State parties “undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity.” The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has stated “the right to education can only be enjoyed if accompanied by the academic freedom of staff and students” and “staff and students throughout the education sector are entitled to academic freedom.” (CESCR Gen. Comment No. 13, 1999: para. 38)
6. Academic freedom is independently and interdependently grounded in rights to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to education, as articulated, respectively, in

ICCPR Article 19 and ICESCR Article 13, and other international instruments. Violations of academic freedom also frequently manifest as violations of other rights, including liberty and security of person, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association.<sup>2</sup>

7. Institutional autonomy for higher education institutions is crucial for the realization of academic freedom and related rights. As described by the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997), “Autonomy is the institutional form of academic freedom and a necessary precondition to guarantee the proper fulfillment of the functions entrusted to higher-education teaching personnel and institutions... Member States are under an obligation to protect higher education institutions from threats to their autonomy coming from any source.” (paras. 18-19). Iran is a UNESCO Member State.
8. Violations of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, equitable access, and other core higher education values undermine security, impair the quality of teaching and research, and limit the ability of higher education to fully serve society.

### Background and Context

9. In the past three decades, Iran’s higher education sector has grown significantly, especially since the lifting of a prohibition on private universities during the decade following the Islamic Revolution.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, public universities’ reputation have improved, with some listed today in international rankings.<sup>4</sup>
10. Alongside the growth of the country’s higher education sector, Iranian authorities have increased restrictions on academic freedom and institutional autonomy. In this reporting cycle, SAR has verified at least 25 significant attacks on higher education communities in Iran, including 16 reports involving imprisonment and/or prosecution; 3 reports of violence, and 7 reports of institutional retaliation against scholars and students.
11. This accounting is not exhaustive and does not include the much larger number of scholars, students, and others who have sought to avoid similar attacks through self-censorship or otherwise restricting activities.

### Wrongful Imprisonment and Prosecution

12. In numerous recent cases, scholars have been detained, arrested, and prosecuted in retaliation for their scholarly work and other nonviolent expression. While these cases involve scholars working in a range of disciplines, all involve national security-related allegations, frequently with little or no publicly-released evidentiary support.
13. On May 25, 2015, **Mohammad Hossein Rafiee**, a retired professor of chemistry and a democracy and human rights activist, was sentenced to six years in prison and banned for two years from political and media activity, for publishing an analysis almost a year earlier of the Iran Nuclear Agreement. He was charged with offenses including “membership in an illegal and anti-national security group,” “propaganda against the regime,” and “the use of television satellite equipment.” Although he was granted bail

while his case was on an appeal, Rafiee, age 71 at the time, was arrested and detained in Evin Prison on June 16, 2015. He reportedly faced conditions including overcrowding, insufficient sanitation, and inadequate nutrition. He was released on medical furlough in September 2016.<sup>5</sup>

14. On April 24, 2016, **Ahmadreza Djalali**, an Iran-born citizen of Sweden and specialist in disaster medicine, was arrested in Iran, taken to Evin Prison, and later charged with espionage, apparently based on collaborations with scholars from what Iran considers to be “enemy states.” He has reportedly been held intermittently in solitary confinement, denied access to a lawyer of his choosing, subjected to psychological torture, and forced to sign a confession admitting crimes against Iranian national security. On February 1, 2017, he was sentenced to death. While detained, Djalali has suffered from health problems including weight loss, severe abdominal pain, and suspected leukemia, but has reportedly been denied access to proper medical treatment.<sup>6</sup> In February 2018, a group of UN experts urged Iran to reverse Djalali’s sentence and grant his release.<sup>7</sup> As of this report, he remains detained.<sup>8</sup>
15. On June 6, 2016, **Homa Hoodfar**, an Iran-born citizen of Canada and a professor of social anthropology and expert on sexuality and gender in Islam at Concordia University, was arrested on charges of “co-operation with a foreign state against the Islamic Republic of Iran” and detained at Evin Prison with restricted access to family and her lawyer. She was accused, among other things, of “dabbling in feminism.” In August 2016, after several weeks in detention—during which she was denied access to an independent medical specialist for treatment of a rare neurological disease—she became disoriented, weakened, had difficulty walking, and was hospitalized. On September 26, 2016 she was released on humanitarian grounds.<sup>9</sup>
16. On August 8, 2016, authorities arrested **Xiyue Wang**, an American graduate student from Princeton University, who was in Iran conducting doctoral research of public records from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Iran’s national archive. Although he had reportedly obtained explicit, written permission to conduct his research, his review of the century-old records apparently formed the basis of an espionage charges against him. On July 16, 2017, he was sentenced to ten years in prison for “infiltration” and “spying under the cover of research” for allegedly “gathering secret and top secret [intelligence]” for the US State Department. His appeal was denied on August 17, 2017. He has been held in solitary confinement, and has reportedly suffered extreme stress, depression, attempted suicide, and multiple diseases.<sup>10</sup> The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that Iran had “no legal basis for the arrest and detention of Mr. Wang,” and that “his deprivation of liberty is arbitrary,” calling for his immediate release and transfer to a hospital.<sup>11</sup> He remains detained as of this report.
17. On January 24, 2018, Iranian authorities arrested **Kevous Seyed-Emami**, an Iranian-Canadian professor of sociology at Imam Sadiq University and the co-founder of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, along with several others, on charges of espionage. On February 9, 2018, authorities announced that Seyed-Emami had died in Evin Prison, claiming the cause was suicide. Seyed-Emami’s death follows two other recent incidents

in Evin Prison in which activists' deaths were later ruled suicides. The circumstances of Seyed-Emami's death have been described as extremely suspicious.<sup>12</sup>

18. On March 12, 2018, Iranian authorities sentenced **Sadegh Zibakalam**, a prominent professor and political analyst known for his criticism of Iranian state policies, to 18 months' imprisonment on charges of "spreading false information" and "propaganda against the state," in apparent retaliation for public remarks regarding the December 2017 protests (discussed *infra*). He was also banned for two years from giving public speeches, writing articles, giving interviews, and social media activity.<sup>13</sup> Two months earlier, he had been dismissed without notice from a position at Islamic Azad University.<sup>14</sup>
19. On March 14, 2018, Iranian intelligence officials arrested Kingston University (UK) art philosophy graduate student **Aras Amiri**, as she was preparing to leave the country, on charges of "assembly and collusion against national security," apparently in connection with her academic work, which includes joint cultural exchange projects between Iranian and British artists. She remains detained in Evin Prison as of this report.<sup>15</sup>
20. On April 15, 2018, **Abbas Edalat**, a British-Iranian professor of computer science and mathematics at Imperial College London, was arrested based on allegations that the Campaign Against Sanctions and Military Intervention in Iran, which he founded, was a British-affiliated anti-Iran group that conducted espionage operations and had contact with leaders of anti-government protests in 2009. Edalat was released and returned to the United Kingdom in December 2018.<sup>16</sup>
21. On December 1, 2018, Iranian authorities reportedly arrested **Meimanat Hosseini Chavoshi**, a research fellow and demography expert from the University of Melbourne's School of Population and Global Health, and **Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi**, a professor of demography at the University of Tehran, apparently based on allegations that, through their work, they had manipulated population statistics, and, as part of a "cultural and social invasion," had provided sensitive information to enemies of Iran.<sup>17</sup>

### Restrictions on Student Expression

22. During previous UPR periods, Iran has supported recommendations related to ensuring the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Nevertheless, during this review period—particularly during and immediately after mass protests in December 2017 and January 2018, which began on campuses throughout the country and were frequently student-led—protests were met with police violence and reported arrests of more than 40 university students.<sup>18</sup>
23. For example, from December 30, 2017 to January 1, 2018, hundreds of students held protests at the University of Tehran. Police clashed with protesters, deploying tear gas and using violent force. They arrested at least fifteen students.<sup>19</sup> During a meeting on January 1, 2018, another four students—members of a student union—were arrested after meeting with the university's chancellor in an effort to negotiate the release of their fifteen detained colleagues.<sup>20</sup>

24. The arrests of student leaders for their role in the December 2017-January 2018 protests continued for several months. For example, several nonviolent student protesters from the University of Tehran were prosecuted on charges including “propaganda against the state,” “collusion against national security,” and “disturbing public order,” including:
- a) **Pedram Pazireh**, an anthropology student and student union leader, arrested on January 5, 2018, convicted on July 29, 2018, and sentenced to seven years imprisonment and 74 lashes.<sup>21</sup>
  - b) **Parisa Rafiei**, a student of photography and activist, arrested on February 25, 2018, convicted on September 3, 2018, and sentenced to seven years imprisonment.<sup>22</sup>
  - c) Theatre student **Mohsen Haghshenas**, and social sciences students **Sina Rabeiei** and **Leila Hosseinzadeh**, all arrested during December 2017-January 2018 demonstrations, and convicted and sentenced on March 11, 2018 to prison terms ranging from one to six years.<sup>23</sup>
  - d) **Sina Darvish Omran** and **Ali Mozaffari**, student activists, arrested during December 2017-January 2018 demonstrations, reportedly held in solitary confinement and forced to make confessions without counsel present, and convicted and sentenced to a total of five years in prison on June 11, 2018.<sup>24</sup>
  - e) **Rouhullah Mardani**, a former student and teacher, arrested during December 2017-January 2018 protests, convicted and sentenced on July 4, 2018 to six years in prison, and prohibited from leaving Iran for two years or participating in any political activities.<sup>25</sup>
25. Students at Amir Kabir University gathered on March 11, 2018 to protest measures taken by state authorities against students who had protested in early 2018. During the demonstration, student members of Iran’s Basij militia attacked and beat the protesters.<sup>26</sup>
26. In December 2017, Iranian authorities acknowledged banning 27 students from graduate programs, in retaliation for alleged political expression. This decision was reportedly part of a longstanding practice of identifying student activists by marking their names with a star in official documents, and preventing many of those students from continuing their university programs. Students who receive one star may enter university after signing a document pledging not to engage in any political or social activism. Students receiving two stars are suspended and may be interrogated by the Intelligence Ministry. Students receiving three stars are subject to a lifetime ban from higher education. Authorities have reportedly acknowledged that 151 PhD students and 398 master’s students had been “starred,” but were allowed to move forward in their educational programs after signing pledges to refrain from political activity. Notwithstanding the official statistics, independent rights organizations allege that as many as 150 to 200 students have been “starred” and banned from academic activity.<sup>27</sup>

## Discrimination Against Members of the Baha'i Faith in Higher Education

27. Although Iran accepted the recommendation during its previous review to “take measures to fully respect the freedom of religion and belief of its citizens,”<sup>28</sup> Baha'i scholars and students continue to suffer severe discrimination, and have faced both administrative and criminal penalties for attempting to access higher education. According to Article 1 of Iran's Supreme Cultural Revolution Council's Student Qualification Regulations, members of the Baha'i community are restricted from enrolling in universities and should be expelled from university programs if they are identified as Baha'i after enrolling.
28. In June 2014 and May 2015, **Azita Rafizadeh** and her husband **Peyman Koushk-Baghi**, both teachers at the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, were sentenced to four and five years in prison respectively on charges of “membership in the illegal and misguided Baha'i group with the aim of acting against national security through illegal activities at the BIHE educational institute.” The institute is a banned online learning service with the purpose of educating members of the Baha'i community. Rafizadeh and Koushk-Baghi are detained as of this report.<sup>29</sup>
29. In addition, scores<sup>30</sup> of Baha'i students have been expelled from universities. These include:
- a) Farzad Safaei, a student at Islamic Azad University, expelled on May 20, 2017, one semester before he was expected to graduate, after listing his faith on an administrative form.<sup>31</sup>
  - b) Soha Izadi, an engineering student, expelled on March 14, 2018 from the Institute for Advance Studies and Basic Science and later informed that she could resume her studies only if she renounced her faith.<sup>32</sup>
  - c) Architecture student Sama Nazifi,<sup>33</sup> chemical engineering student Badi Sfajou,<sup>34</sup> and Shirin Bani Nejad,<sup>35</sup> a student approaching graduation, all expelled in early January 2019 from Islamic Azad University on apparently religious grounds.

## Recommendations to Iranian Authorities

30. SAR urges UN member states to call on Iran to publicly affirm its commitment to academic freedom and related human rights by:
- a) Unconditionally releasing scholars and students held for nonviolent academic activity, expression, association, or religious identity—including Ahmadreza Djalali, Xiyue Wang, Aras Amiri, Pedram Pazireh, Parisa Rafiei, Mohsen Haghshenas, Sina Rabeiei, Leila Hosseinzadeh, Sina Darvish Omran, Ali Mozaffari, Rouhullah Mardani, Azita Rafizadeh, and Peyman Koushk-Baghi—and, pending their release, ensuring due process, humane treatment, and access to family, counsel, and medical treatment;

- b) Refraining from future arrest and prosecution of scholars and students relating to their nonviolent academic activity, expression, association, or religious identity;
- c) Revising national statutes, decrees, and practices—including that of “starring” students—to comply with international standards relating to academic freedom, free expression, and freedom of association;
- d) Repealing discriminatory policies and practices targeting religious minorities including the Baha’i community, and ensuring their access to higher education and right to education generally.
- e) Publicly endorse the Principles of State Responsibility to Protect Higher Education from Attack, which provide that States should:
  - i. Abstain from direct or complicit involvement in attacks on higher education;
  - ii. Protect higher education against present and future attacks;
  - iii. Assist victims of attacks; and
  - iv. Deter future attacks, including by investigating attacks and holding perpetrators accountable.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This submission is the product of a joint effort between SAR and the Human Rights Law Centre, School of Law, University of Nottingham. SAR gratefully acknowledges the substantial research and drafting work of Nottingham faculty and students. This submission may not reflect the views of the Human Rights Law Centre, School of Law, University of Nottingham, Nottingham faculty and students, or individual Scholars at Risk Network members, institutions, or participating individuals. Scholars at Risk invites comments on this report or inquiries about our work at [scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu](mailto:scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu).

<sup>2</sup> 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 (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2014.976203>).

<sup>3</sup> The number of private universities has expanded from 50 in 2005 to 354 in 2014. Likewise, student enrollment at universities increased from 1.3 million in 1999 to 4.7 million in 2014. *See* [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286417731\\_Iran%27s\\_Overeducation\\_Crisis\\_Causes\\_and\\_Ramification](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286417731_Iran%27s_Overeducation_Crisis_Causes_and_Ramification), <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>

<sup>4</sup> University growth has been limited to the undergraduate level, forcing many students seeking graduate studies to study abroad. *See* [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/08/19/the-new-business-of-education-in-iran/?utm\\_term=.bd1ccd2621e5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/08/19/the-new-business-of-education-in-iran/?utm_term=.bd1ccd2621e5)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2015-06-16-unaffiliated/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2019/02/swedish-iranian-scientist-denied-medical-treatment-for-demanding-to-be-transported-with-dignity/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22645&LangID=E>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2017-02-01-university-eastern-piedmont-vrije-universiteit-brussel/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2016-06-06-concordia-university/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2016-08-08-princeton-university/>

- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/2018/09/iran-un-working-group-issues-opinion-on-xiyue-wangs-imprisonment/>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-01-24-imam-sadiq-university/>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-03-12-university-tehran/>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-02-28-islamic-azad-university/>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-03-14-kingston-university/>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-04-15-imperial-college-london/> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46679054>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-12-01-university-of-melbourne/> Chavoshi was reportedly released from prison in late January, 2019.
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/01/iranian-security-forces-have-arrested-more-than-40-university-students-these-are-their-names/>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2017-12-30-university-tehran/>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-01-01-unknown/>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-01-05-university-of-tehran/>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-02-25-university-of-tehran/>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-03-11-university-of-tehran/>
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-03-14-kingston-university/>
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-07-04-university-of-tehran/>
- <sup>26</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-03-11-amir-kabir-university/>
- <sup>27</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2017-12-11-various-institutions/>;  
<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/740474/سـد تارمـد دانـد شـجـویـ۵-ر و ا ی ت>
- <sup>28</sup> [https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/iran\\_islamic\\_republic\\_of/session\\_20\\_-\\_october\\_2014/recommendations\\_and\\_pledges\\_iran\\_2014.pdf](https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/iran_islamic_republic_of/session_20_-_october_2014/recommendations_and_pledges_iran_2014.pdf)
- <sup>29</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2015-10-24-bahai-institute-higher-education-bihe/>
- <sup>30</sup> <http://iranpresswatch.org/post/19527/just-six-months-iranian-universities-expelled-50-bahai-students-religious-beliefs/>, listing 50 Baha'i students who were expelled from Iranian universities "because of their religious beliefs."
- <sup>31</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2017-05-20-islamic-azad-university/>
- <sup>32</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2018-03-14-institute-for-advanced-studies-in-basic-sciences/>
- <sup>33</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2019-01-05-islamic-azad-university/>
- <sup>34</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2019-01-09-islamic-azad-university-2/>
- <sup>35</sup> <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/report/2019-01-09-islamic-azad-university/>
- <sup>36</sup> For more information, please see: [https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Principles\\_of\\_State\\_Responsibility.pdf](https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Principles_of_State_Responsibility.pdf)