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Declining Academic Freedom in the Maghreb

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After an upwards trend prior to 2011, academic freedom in the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Mali, Morocco, and Tunisia) has been deteriorating for the past decade and counting. It is hardly surprising that levels thereof in the Maghreb are declining given that North Africa has become more autocratic during this time period (V-Dem Report 2024). Documented violations of academic freedom range from new regulations and legislation undermining university autonomy to arrests of students and scholars.

- Universities, scholars, and students throughout the Maghreb have increasingly become the target of surveillance, censorship, persecution, and political violence since the 2011 uprisings.
- According to UNESCO, women are still underrepresented in higher-education institutions (HEIs) regionally and the gender gap in education remains high (Elmeshad 2013).
- University autonomy has been curtailed and undermined by state interference throughout the region. It perpetuates through the underfunding of higher education, novel laws or regulations restricting teaching freedom and university self-governance, or the appointment of university administrators based on their political allegiance instead of their qualifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

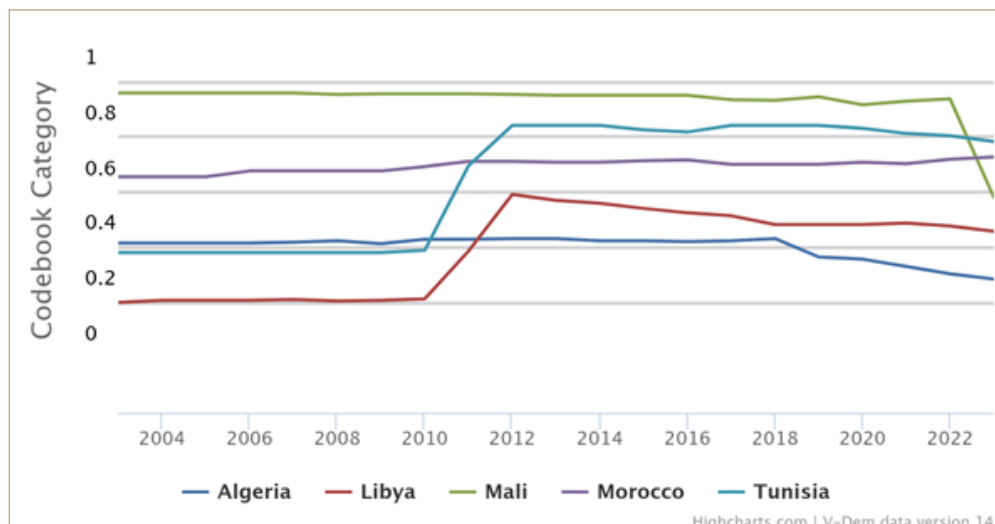
It is crucial that universities, funders, and governments involved in cooperation with North African HEIs, scholars, or students do not – even unintentionally – contribute to the deterioration of academic freedom. Therefore, the former should refrain from partnerships with organisations that have close ties to the incumbent regimes, or at least practise due diligence. HEIs as well as funding and international-exchange organisations should use their leverage to protect and promote academic freedom and university autonomy in the region and establish programmes to support students and scholars at risk. If those participating in such programmes are targeted by defamation campaigns or law-enforcement officials, their institutions, colleagues, and funders must stand up for their partners unequivocally.

DECLINING ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE MAGHREB

Deterioration of academic freedom

Academic freedom in the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Mali, Morocco, and Tunisia) has been deteriorating for more than ten years now, as data by the Academic Freedom index (AFi) (see Figure 1 below) and Saliba (2018, 2020) show. Universities, academics, and students throughout the region have increasingly become the target of surveillance, censorship, state interference, and political violence since the 2011 uprisings (Saliba 2018: 313).

Figure 1. AFi Data for Select Maghreb States, 2003–2023



Source: V-Dem dataset version 14.

For the entire West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region, the AFi finds academic-freedom levels to have been on a continued downwards trend since 2011 (Kinzelbach et al. 2024). In terms of global distribution, the Maghreb countries all fall into the bottom half of the AFi ranking. Tunisia is the exception, as the only WANA country making the top half of this global ranking index.

Box 1. What Is Academic Freedom?

I understand “academic freedom” as the absence of any legal, physical, or structural interference by state or non-state actors in a university’s institutional autonomy and a researcher’s personal independence and integrity (Grimm and Saliba 2019: 47).

Increasing repression of students and scholars

Higher-education institutions (HEIs), their students, and their staff have not gone unaffected by broader political developments in the WANA region. Since the uprisings in 2011, which shook many countries in North Africa and West Asia, an increasing number of violent conflicts, instances of both state collapse as well as authoritarian resurgence, alongside the continued rule of overtly repressive autocracies have defined the political context in which WANA academics work and students learn (Saliba 2018: 313). However, different patterns to how universities have been affected have emerged across the region.

The political mobilisation and contestation witnessed since 2011 – also at universities – has led to a systematic crackdown on critical students and researchers. In all Maghreb countries, students and academics have been increasingly targeted for their political involvement in protests or for raising opinions not in line with their governments’ policies. Autocrats have targeted dissent on university campuses by means of persecution, arrests,

retaliatory discharges, expulsions, disciplinary measures, and exerting greater political control over the higher-education sector in general through the issuing of new regulations and via political interference in appointments. Let us have a closer look at the situation in the Maghreb's individual countries.

Algeria

In Algeria, politically involved academics and students have been targeted by the authorities in the wake of the 2019 so-called Hirak protests that finally brought down Abdelaziz Bouteflika after 20 years as president. Especially during the Tuesday protests organised by students and student unions across the country, the security forces violently dispersed those gathered and prosecuted detainees. Some of the students arrested in the wake of these protests remained in jail years after the event (Africanews 2021).

Libya

The fragmentation of statehood in Libya has negatively affected the country's HEIs. Only 12 out of around 20 universities were still operating in 2019 (Derbesh 2019: 4). As a result, scholars have lost their jobs or left the country, and many high-school graduates have fewer options for further study. Especially in the eastern part of the country, academic freedom has suffered due to increasing political control of university governance, research agendas, and teaching curricula. While universities are free of charge, the civil war has undermined the right and access to education for many young Libyans. Furthermore, the deteriorating human rights situation has nurtured a climate of fear among academics that they could be targeted by violent state or non-state actors for criticising some of these groups.

Mali

The military coup of August 2020 ushered in a junta-led transitional government. A new Constitution was ratified in 2023, but the military junta has remained firmly in control of the government since. The political violence continuing even after the military coup and limited statehood have led to a further deterioration of academic freedom in the country in recent years. The 2020 coup and its aftermath have shrunk the space for academics to criticise the policies and conduct of the military junta, as prominent academics have been persecuted and jailed under trumped up charges of "harming the reputation of the state," "defamation," or the "dissemination of false news disturbing public peace" (Radar Africa 2024).

Morocco

In Morocco, state officials and the security services have targeted particularly outspoken academics who crossed one of the red lines for the palace, be it criticising the monarchy itself or the rampant corruption in the kingdom, expressing solidarity with protesters in the Rif region, or demanding autonomy for Western Sahara. Shana Cohen, a sociologist working on Morocco, argued almost a decade ago already that

without the freedom to think differently, research cannot address real issues: poverty, unemployment and public health. Those who want to do such research or use their education to find practical solutions may try to leave. Those who want to stay in Morocco often leave academia. (Cohen 2015)

Tunisia

In Tunisia, academic freedom has declined as a result of the authoritarian turn happening in the wake of the 2021 constitutional coup (Guellali 2021). While politicians, critical

journalists, and civil society organisations opposing Kais Saied's power grab are feeling the brunt of the crackdown on dissent, politically motivated arrests and smear campaigns have also targeted students and scholars daring to criticise the president's rolling back of some of the democratic and human rights achievements of the 2011 Revolution and the 2014 Constitution.

HOW ACADEMIC FREEDOM IS RESTRICTED IN THE MAGHREB

University autonomy

At the legal and institutional levels, politically appointed rectors and the nature of current public-funding structures serve to undermine universities' autonomy and democratic self-governance (Roberts Lyer and Suba 2019). Governments in the Maghreb states prefer to exert political control over university governance and appointments to key administrative positions.

Surveillance and campus integrity

HEIs, in particular universities given their tradition of being a space for political socialisation and organisation, have been securitised since the 2010/11 and then 2018/19 uprisings in the region. States have increased the police presence on campuses throughout the Maghreb, making repression against students and scholars a more commonplace occurrence (Kohstall 2015). In some countries, officials from the domestic security services are given administrative roles in university management in order to collect information on critical students and faculty and report any suspicious behaviour. Students and scholars are also recruited as informants by the security services, with them keeping an eye on the activities of their peers. As a result of the switch to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital-surveillance tools have since also been used to limit teaching freedom and the exchange of ideas.

Self-censorship

According to a joint online survey by Al-Fanar Media and Scholars at Risk from 2020 (Faek 2021), about 75 per cent of lecturers at universities in the WANA region practise self-censorship in their professional lives. Most of them do so to avoid getting into trouble with state or religious authorities. However, given the widespread legal and regulatory restrictions on what professors can say or do, the real levels of academic self-censorship could be much higher.

Repression and persecution

The Academic Freedom Monitoring Project by Scholars at Risk documented five attacks against scholars, students, and academic institutions in North Africa for 2023. These range from imprisonment to a loss of position. Amid the violent conflicts in Libya and Mali, universities have become the target of militant groups, leading to looting and enforced disappearances of staff. Academic freedom in the region is not only curtailed by encroaching domestic political control over university governance and curricula as well as the persecution of critical students and scholars. Transnational repression by Arab regimes targeting the latter working abroad is an increasingly common practice, too (Sparks 2024).

In connection with racist remarks made by Tunisia's president in 2023, Black African asylum-seekers as well as Black African exchange students in the country have experienced arbitrary arrest, physical attacks, and slurs (also on social media). After publicly criticising Saied for his remarks, Christian Kwongang, a Cameroonian student in Tunis who led the Association of African Students and Interns in Tunisia, was arrested

“without official charges or trial” in March 2024 (Voice of Africa 2024). Some years earlier, in 2016, Tunisian Professor Amel Grami, who had been invited to participate in an international conference in Egypt, was detained and interrogated by the latter’s security services at Cairo International Airport (MESA CAF 2016). In Morocco, Professor Maati Monjib was jailed in 2015 and again between 2020 and 2021. Since then, Monjib has been denied the right to travel and has been suspended from his duties as a history professor at Mohammed V University.

Furthermore, *Scholars at Risk* (2023) documented at least two cases of wrongful imprisonment vis-à-vis academics at the University of Tripoli last year. On 16 November 2023, Libya’s Internal Security Agency detained Professor Abdel Fattah Al-Sayeh, Head of the General Syndicate of University Teaching Staff Members. Al-Sayeh’s arrest occurred against the backdrop of a protest by university teaching staff led by the union he headed. Only 12 days later, members of an armed group claiming to be affiliated with the internal security apparatus of the Libyan Government of National Unity arrested another scholar, Dr. Abdulkader Al-Lamoushi. The arbitrary arrest of two prominent scholars had a chilling effect on other academics in Libya (considering) standing up for better working conditions.

Conflict and state fragmentation

With current events in Libya and Mali, two of the Maghreb’s constitutive countries have effectively devolved into violent conflict in the past decade and the state disintegrated. As a consequence of this political violence and state failure, their universities are barely able to keep functioning (OHCHR 2023). Even where teaching and research activities have continued, scholars as well as students perceived critical to groups controlling the territory on which these HEIs are located are subject to intimidation, violence, disappearances, imprisonment, and even torture and killings. The security services or militias perpetrating such repression are largely acting with impunity. Moreover, the conflicts in Libya and Mali have displaced hundreds if not thousands of students and scholars.

HOW INTERNATIONAL HIGHER-EDUCATION COOPERATION CAN FOSTER ACADEMIC FREEDOM

International research collaboration and scholarly exchange across borders are not only fundamental to knowledge production; they can also help foster academic freedom. Restrictions on cooperation- and exchange formats should thus be minimal. However, when working with HEIs in authoritarian contexts, it is important to acknowledge that cooperation agreements may also harbour risks regarding academic freedom. Governments, university administrators, and scholars joining forces with peers in North Africa have to be aware of the potential issues here.

First, HEIs that have partnerships with universities in the Maghreb should acknowledge that its respective authoritarian regimes have used international partnerships to put pressure on free-thinking scholarly inquiry and teaching practices, thereby restricting academic freedom both at home and abroad. Autocrats further use international higher-education exchange formats to whitewash their rule through the reputational gains accruing from working with universities abroad. Some 72 per cent of respondents in a recent survey conducted among those at the WANA region’s universities (Marinoni and Cardona 2024: 48) deemed “internationalisation” to be of very high importance for these institutions. This preference makes taking action to protect academic freedom within related cooperation agreements and in practice feasible. To that end, it is essential that university leaderships and researchers involved in such joint endeavours define clear parameters on what would prompt a halt or – as a last resort – their withdrawal from scientific or teaching cooperation agreements (Baykal and Benner 2020: 101).



Second, if students or scholars participating in international exchange are targeted by defamation campaigns or law-enforcement officials, institutions must stand up for their partners unequivocally. Third, universities and governments should not enter into partnerships with organisations that have close ties to the incumbent regimes. As part of that, individuals and institutions should be transparent about their sources of funding, articulate an unambiguous commitment to academic freedom, and not unduly restrict scientific inquiry in funding-, cooperation-, and exchange agreements. Fourth and finally, with instability and political violence prevalent across the Maghreb, more funding should be allocated to programmes supporting at-risk students and scholars to better accommodate displaced researchers and to provide them with increased opportunities to continue their academic work abroad (Saliba 2022: 59).

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