Science, Academic Freedom, and Human Rights

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Lisa Anderson’s article, “Academic Freedom in a Globalized World,” in the September issue of Science & Diplomacy is a powerful reminder of the critical importance of academic freedom to the pursuit and advance of science in a world with complexities and dangers. It also emphasizes the importance of the world’s science community in providing support and assistance to colleagues at risk and the challenging questions that are faced in doing so responsibly and effectively.

The annual meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations in September is another reminder of these issues. The lofty goals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are confronted with the harsh realities of the violent conflicts and the resulting human suffering that exist in too many parts of the world. For all of us interested in the role of science in human affairs, including diplomacy, the contribution of science to the defense of academic freedom and the pursuit of human rights remains a vital issue.

Scientific institutions and professional societies in many countries are undertaking initiatives for supporting and protecting the human rights of their colleagues. Here are several initiatives that are not only inspirational but have achieved real results:

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(1) International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies

The network founded in 1993 works to “address serious issues of mutual concern involving science and human rights” and “draws upon the influence and stature of participating academies to advocate for professional colleagues... subjected to severe repression in violation of international human rights norms.”\(^1\) It now includes eighty academies and scholarly societies from around the world, with each organization represented by a prominent member who is a human rights advocate. The network raises awareness of pressing issues of science and human rights, and holds a biennial convocation with the most recent meeting scheduled for Panama in October 2016. The network makes public statements through its executive committee, and recent ones have addressed situations in a number of countries. Several member academies, including the Committee on Human Rights of the U.S. National Academies, also pursue individual cases and advocate on behalf of the scientists whose human rights are in jeopardy. Many cases have had positive outcomes, and many members of the academies consider this committee to be so important that they devote annual financial gifts to its work.

(2) Scholars at Risk (SAR)

SAR is an international network of institutions and individuals devoted to protecting scholars in danger and defending academic freedom. All scholarly disciplines in higher education are included. SAR began in 1999 at the University of Chicago, and its headquarters are now at New York University. National SAR sections exist in, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Partner networks between SAR and existing networks of higher education institutions bring SAR’s activities to hundreds of institutions in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Through its international network, SAR arranges temporary academic positions at member universities and colleges for scholars facing grave threats. In addition, SAR conducts research and monitoring through its Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, which includes reporting, analyzing, and tracking situations that include killings/violence/disappearances, wrongful imprisonment/detention, wrongful prosecution, restrictions on travel or movement, retaliatory discharge/loss of position, and other significant events. SAR coordinates action campaigns and alerts, leads international advocacy, and conducts faculty-led student advisory seminars. SAR has led workshops to discuss academic freedom in many countries, including some where challenges to academic freedom have occurred.
(3) Philipp Schwartz Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

This initiative provides a fully funded twenty-four–month fellowship at German research institutions for threatened foreign researchers. The first round included fellowships for twenty-three researchers coming from Syria (fourteen), Turkey (six), Libya, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan (one each). Another twenty-four threatened researchers will be starting their fellowships in German institutions in January 2017. Upon creation of the program, the German foreign minister stated, “With the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, we give threatened scientists an opportunity to continue conducting research, free from threat, so that they will be able to assume responsibility in their home countries at a later point in time. Philipp Schwartz himself had to flee Nazi Germany in the 1930s. For this reason it is only right when we are the ones today who help persecuted scientists.”

The foundation is also serving as the secretariat for a newly created German Section of the SAR network. An important U.S. institution that for more than a decade has provided support for visiting scholars from war-torn areas is the Scholars Rescue Fund of the Institute for International Education.

(4) AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition

The AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science, publisher of Science & Diplomacy) Scientific Responsibility, Human Rights and Law (SRHRL) Program hosts and staffs the Science and Human Rights Coalition, which is a network of twenty-three scientific and engineering membership organizations and two affiliated organizations. The coalition is “devoted to facilitating communication and partnerships on human rights within and across scientific communities, and between these and human rights communities.” Through its newsletter, meetings, and projects, it strives “to improve human rights practitioners’ access to scientific and technological information and knowledge and to engage scientists, engineers and health professionals in human rights issues.” Coalition projects include a primer on scientific freedom and human rights aimed at scientific associations, webinars for member associations, and an annotated bibliography organized by discipline. SRHRL has other relevant projects, including applying geospatial technologies to human rights and humanitarian issues and sending action alerts to hundreds of AAAS members. The newsletter, reports, and other resources are made available on the SRHRL website.

The Role of Science in Peace

The worldwide science and technology community can contribute in other significant ways to reducing conflicts and defending those whose human rights have been violated. The sixteenth Sustainable Development Goal of the United
Nations focuses on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and providing access to justice. The UN has emphasized the role of science, technology, and innovation (STI) for achieving all of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). For the sixteenth goal, STI can contribute to peace building through development of new tools in areas such as monitoring treaties, countering terrorism, reducing corruption, supporting human rights investigations, increasing security of marginalized groups, reducing crime, and helping post-conflict societies. The external committee advising the UN on the role of STI for the SDGs emphasized this area as one that should receive increased effort.

Another undertaking worth noting is the PeaceTech Initiative of the U.S. Institute for Peace. Its purpose is using technological advances and data to help reduce violence and conflicts around the world. The initiative is undertaking projects in a number of countries. It also sponsors a roundtable with the U.S. National Academy of Engineering on science and technology for peace building, and it is developing its PeaceTech Lab for its Washington headquarters.

A forthcoming issue of *Science & Diplomacy* will include an article summarizing what was learned and recommended from a symposium entitled “The Role of Science Diplomacy in International Crises: Syria as a Case Study” that was held in June 2016. A committed volunteer group of young scientists—current and past members of the Science Diplomacy Affinity Group of AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellows—organized the symposium. The human suffering and explosion of violence in Syria is truly a great tragedy for the world. The article focuses on concrete actions that can possibly help in future crises focusing on countering weapons of mass destruction, addressing the effects of climate change in conflict zones, combating cultural heritage destruction, and assisting refugees and others affected by conflict.

All of the initiatives mentioned in this editorial, including the volunteer efforts of the AAAS S&T Fellows, should challenge all of us to contribute to efforts that can help reduce violence, protect human rights, advance academic freedom, and avert future human tragedies worldwide.

**Endnotes**

4. Ibid.