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## Academic Freedom in a Globalized World

*Lisa Anderson*

*At the 153rd annual meeting of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in early May 2016, the Academies’ Committee on Human Rights invited Dr. Lisa Anderson, recent past president of the American University in Cairo, dean emerita of Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, and former member of the board of Human Rights Watch, to reflect on current issues surrounding academic freedom. This article is adapted from her remarks.*

After nearly eight years in Cairo, I taught a graduate class at Columbia this spring. The course was called “Authoritarianism: Accountability and Policy Making in Non-Democratic Settings”; it was a graduate seminar with seventeen students, among whom were nationals of Ecuador, Colombia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, China, and Korea. As you can imagine, we had great class discussions.

But it was also disquieting. Four of the students in class—nearly a quarter of the total and a third of the international students—reported (to me, not to the class) that they had encountered the security services of their countries during the semester. One was contacted directly by a government official in New York to ask about the course and why he was taking it. Another was told by the Fulbright office in his home country to remove several posts on his Facebook page because the office did

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not want to risk its operations in his country. A third student was told that should she wish to conduct research in her home country, it would never get government funding. And the fourth was told by his parents that a tweet he'd sent about his discovery of a book in the Columbia library on his country's army in the 1960s had prompted a worrisome call to his father. It was unsettling and sobering.

And it was instructive. The borders between "us" and "them" are obviously permeable, and increasingly so—at both the scientific and the governmental levels. Many, many U.S. research scientists and scholars have international collaborators operating abroad and, rightfully, they are professionally and personally concerned about their ability to operate effectively. Many U.S. research scientists and scholars have international students and colleagues in their labs, their graduate classes, and their research networks, and they are making substantial investments of time and talent in promoting their ability to conduct research.

So, too, governments collaborate to share, and interfere in, intelligence gathering around the world. The permeability of borders is linking not only scientific communities but also vast networks of spies, public and private, working in security and in commerce.

And the distinction between scholarly research and intelligence gathering is itself increasingly vague and vexed. The Egyptian historian Khaled Fahmy told a story in a recent article that would be a hilarious parody of the 1984-ish world of academic research in nondemocratic settings were it not actually true.<sup>1</sup> He recounts his request to photocopy maps of the first postal routes in Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century, which was denied on national security grounds. As the authorities patiently explained to Professor Fahmy, border disputes, including several between Egypt and Israel, have been resolved on the basis of historical maps; maps are tools of war and peace and therefore national security assets.

Obviously, if nineteenth-century documents are security risks, all the more is research involving GPS maps,<sup>2</sup> space exploration, nuclear materials, defense funding, or...labor mobilization. Trade unions were the subject of the dissertation research of Giulio Regeni, the Italian doctoral student at Cambridge University who disappeared in Cairo on January 25, 2016—the anniversary of the uprising in Egypt—and whose tortured body was found by the side of the road weeks later. War, violence, and fear breed suspicion and mistrust—making everything a security risk. "After all," an unnamed Egyptian official was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying of Regeni, "who comes to Egypt to study trade unions?" The implication of the question—that only spies care about comparative labor history and, moreover, that there is something intrinsically suspect about efforts to acquire knowledge, establish facts, or exercise judgment—risks becoming a debilitating reality.<sup>3</sup>

The authors of Giulio Regeni's death will probably never be known, nor will their motives. It is not hard to speculate; as was aptly said about American peace activist Rachel Corrie's 2003 death in the Gaza Strip—she was run over by an

Israeli bulldozer as she tried to block house demolitions—“It was either a really gross mistake or a really brutal murder.”<sup>4</sup> It was, of course, both.

We are in a world of quantum politics, a world in which uncertainty is not a transient condition but a principle. And for those of us accustomed to the search for scientific truth, that itself is somewhat disconcerting, as is the notion that we are helpless in the face of murderous regimes, wrecked research programs, threatened colleagues, and intimidated students.

## **What to do?**

How to respond to these challenges depends on what you want to accomplish. If you want to make yourself feel better, you may wish to try shunning. This is what the board of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) did in issuing a “security alert” for Egypt in the aftermath of Regeni’s murder.<sup>5</sup> For the first time in its fifty-year history, MESA advised its members to “reflect carefully” on travel to a country in the region—in this instance Egypt, one of the very few countries in the Arab world in which there are actually hundreds of American academics working and conducting research, as well, of course, as thousands of Egyptian scholars and scientists with American university degrees. In advising that Egypt may be too dangerous to travel to, much less conduct research in, the MESA board not only suggested that in ordinary circumstances we need not “reflect carefully” on what we do—a proposition with which I take exception in itself—but effectively abandoned the thousands of colleagues in the country who now, more than ever, need to know they have a scientific community to continue interacting with and relying on for advice, criticism, and help in disseminating their findings and strengthening their fields.

I do not think the transient satisfactions of indignation justify that approach—the costs are vastly weightier than the benefits.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of weighing costs and benefits in a world of scientific discovery is itself somewhat disheartening, though one we have confronted for decades, if not forever, as governments shrink the definition of the public interest to security and urge that we seek support for research for anything else we might want to do (or cannot plausibly devise a security rationale for) in the private sector, touting its commercial promise—a promised “ROI” in which the pecuniary, if not social or scientific, benefits will outweigh the costs.

If we are to acknowledge that we must consider possible costs of what we do in the service of indisputably meritorious ends, as we should, we also need to know what we can compromise and what we cannot. Efforts to inhibit research or silence scholars should be unequivocally condemned as incompatible with the principles of free inquiry that underlie education and research. Naming and shaming—the classic tools of human rights advocacy—are often frustratingly ineffective, but they are a first and essential step. You can’t change what no one knows about. So the

work professional associations do to call out violations of academic freedom is vitally important.

But keep in mind that, as with human rights advocacy in general, however apolitical you wish this effort to be—you hope “the facts will speak for themselves” and engender the outrage you feel—it will always be politicized, by both the government and your putative allies. I mentioned Rachel Corrie not because she was a scholar—she was not—but because I was told several months ago by a colleague in Cairo that he was comforted, indeed heartened, by the concerted effort under way to make of Regeni’s death “Egypt’s Rachel Corrie”—a symbol of official dishonesty, abuse, and impunity in the face of artless idealism. And he was encouraged that the effort to use this tragedy to embarrass and weaken it has not gone unnoticed by the current government of Egypt.

So if you embrace advocacy for academic freedom, you will inevitably be drawn into local political contests and conflicts. That may not be for the fainthearted, but for those who elect to wade in, it should not be a surprise. You will not be joining a battle of the obviously virtuous against the patently vicious; it will be a political campaign, with spin and innuendo, financial inducements, fearmongering, and there will rarely be a clear winner.

And these battles are not merely “over there.” Earlier, I also told you about the Fulbright office’s efforts to sanitize the Facebook page of a foreign student in the United States for another reason. Our own government is not innocent in many of these stories. Nine years after the fact, the U.S. government said the Israeli investigation of Rachel Corrie’s death was “not satisfactory,” and was not as thorough, credible, or transparent as it should have been. The Egyptian government’s investigation of Regeni’s murder will certainly be no more thorough, credible, or transparent. The U.S. government is equally unlikely to outdo itself: we will see an expression of concern, disappointment among friends, and a willingness to quickly move on.

In fact, though, very few violations of academic freedom are as obvious as torture and murder. Most of the time, of course, you can’t be sure. It is often hard to tell whether apparently friendly advice about your research design is well-intentioned guidance or a veiled threat. Or whether a request for a research permit languishes for months because of bureaucratic incompetence or political suppression. Or whether a scientist is jailed because his work is deemed seditious or because he is a political activist. Many of us have more than one pursuit, and in worlds where soccer fans and book clubs are suspect, it may be hard to tell exactly why an individual caught the eye of the intelligence services. But the jailed, the pursued, the harassed will ask for help from any quarter—including from professional contacts who are ill-equipped to judge the merits of the claims.

So knowing exactly what to do in any particular circumstance is a judgment call, an exercise in discretion, not the simple application of a principle. It means weighing egregiousness and trustworthiness, balancing the means at hand with

the ends in sight—and it means feeling terrible a lot because you just can't tell where truth lies and what is the honorable thing to do.

In the face of egregious violations of academic freedom, it is tempting to counsel against collaborating with colleagues—they themselves may be collaborators with the offending government, after all. Continued involvement risks entanglement—the uncertainty of modern politics. But such refusal does no service to those who would benefit from the acquisition of knowledge, the establishment of facts, or the exercise of judgment—that is to say, to all of us.

So sometimes professors will tell students that their proposed research is not feasible, not because they can't run the experiments with the available equipment but because there is a brutal dictatorship or a vicious war in their projected research site. And university institutional review boards are no solution to this problem; sometimes what is legal is unethical and sometimes what is unethical is legal. So professors will urge their students to find another site, or will help them reframe the proposed research to be less dangerous, less provocative, and more easily understood by research subjects and collaborators on-site. This is education, and it is honing the good judgment that necessarily accompanies a successful academic and research career.

But this can feel like a compromise of the principles of academic freedom, particularly to those who feel hemmed in by restrictions at every turn. "Are we not supposed to follow our research wherever it takes us?" Well, for example, the U.S. government's Boren Fellowship program will not let recipients take it to Egypt—it is said to be too dangerous, although there is no State Department travel warning—effectively seconding MESA's call to avoid the country. This endorsement of the MESA position warning against travel to Egypt would appall most MESA worthies if they gave it any thought, since the majority of them opposed naming this fellowship program after the longest-serving chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence when it was established. Yet today the Boren program is effectively deciding whether scholars can act on principle or exercise judgment in advising their students, while simultaneously contributing to the confusion of research and intelligence gathering that the MESA scholars had anticipated.

### **A few words of advice**

The implications of the securitization of research, both in the sources and purposes of research funding and in who is permitted to conduct research, when, and where, should be taken up more vigorously by professional associations and academies. These implications are no less dazzling, tempting, and terrifying than those of the commercialization of scientific research in the era of Bayh-Dole,<sup>7</sup> and they will only grow as terrorism drives government policies around the world.

So in sum, my advice to the international community of research scholars and scientists:

1. Don't shun your colleagues. This plays into the hands of those who want to suppress research collaboration and does nothing to provide concrete support to fellow scholars and scientists.
2. Don't abandon your research goals. Be pragmatic, flexible, and attentive to the implications of your work for those who may carry it out and who may rely on it, but don't succumb to intimidation—bullying only works as long as it works.
3. Continue to name and shame, and take up individual cases. You will always feel terrible knowing both that there are hundreds more scholars and scientists caught invisibly between the permitted and the prohibited and that no individual is a saint, but a little courage, assistance, and comfort on your part is better than none.
4. Finally, advocate and explain. You know what academic freedom is, mostly because you have been its beneficiary, and you should advocate the virtue and value of education and research proudly, confidently, and energetically, and be absolutely uncompromising in demanding the rights and responsibilities that sustain it, including freedom of information, expression, and association. You can tell the world what is lost by discouraging research: the capacity to cultivate and advance new ideas that will enhance the prospects for economic prosperity, human security, social justice, and dignity everywhere. **SD**

#### Endnotes

1. Khaled Fahmy, "Giulio, the Islands, and National Security," *Mada Masr*, April 23, 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/giulio-islands-and-national-security>.
2. Several weeks after Fahmy's essay appeared, a long article on the similarly vexed use of maps in Mexico was published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: see Paul Voosen, "The Oaxaca Incident: A Geographer's Efforts to Map a Mexican Village Reveal the Risks of Military Entanglement," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Oaxaca-Incident/236257>.
3. Kareem Fahim, Nour Youssef and Declan Walsh, "Death of a Student, Giulio Regeni, Highlights Perils for Egyptians, Too," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/world/middleeast/giulio-regeni-egypt-killing.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/world/middleeast/giulio-regeni-egypt-killing.html?_r=0).
4. Dispatches from The Killing Zone, YouTube video, 49:23, posted by Umar Nabi, April 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaCU2vwjBLw>.
5. Middle East Studies Association, Security Alert for Study and Research in Egypt, February 10, 2016, <http://mesana.org/about/board-letters-statements.html#Egypt-Security-Alert>.
6. My response to the MESA statement was published as an opinion piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: see Lisa Anderson, "How to Respond to a Graduate Student's Death in Egypt," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 29, 2016, <http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Respond-to-a-Graduate/235537>.
7. The Bayh Dole Act of 1980 authorizes universities, small businesses, and not-for-profits to retain intellectual property developed in federal government-funded research, creating substantial opportunities for revenues based on the commercialization of such discoveries and inventions, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research\\_funding#Government-funded\\_research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research_funding#Government-funded_research).