

# Iran: Science under the Theocratic Regime

“Woman, Life, Freedom”: Under this slogan, thousands of people, especially young Iranians, have protested in recent years against the strict Islamic regime in Iran, demanding more freedom and women’s rights. The protests were triggered by the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman who died in police custody in 2022 after being accused of improperly wearing her headscarf. The government responded to the protests with brutal violence, mass arrests, and tighter control over public life.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been a theocratic republic where religious leaders play a central political role. In recent years, repression against oppositional groups and restrictions on fundamental freedoms have intensified. In response, many countries have imposed sanctions on Iran.

The repressions have also significantly impacted the academic community. Since the revolution, the Iranian government has systematically worked to ideologically

control the higher education system and “cleanse” it of critical voices. Today, universities increasingly function as tools for spreading the regime’s ideology. Scholars and educators are closely monitored. Those who disagree with the regime’s ideological and religious views risk persecution, arrest, or being banned from their professions. International collaborations have also become nearly impossible. Despite these restrictions, universities are also hubs of resistance, as protests often originate from students.

Theater scholar Azadeh Ganjeh advocated for reforms and the rights of her students as a professor in Tehran. Her critical stance and activism cost her her income and led to threats and severe restrictions on her work. To continue upholding her values and to research freely, she left Iran in 2022 and came to Germany. Today, she works at Universität Hildesheim and Hochschule der Künste im Sozialen Ottersberg.



Listen to the podcast at  
[www.fragile-freiheit.de](http://www.fragile-freiheit.de)

As of: January 2025

## Tasks

Use the QR code to access the podcast “Fragile Freedom”. Listen to the interview with Azadeh Ganjeh and answer the following questions:

- 1) How does the Iranian regime control academia?
- 2) Azadeh Ganjeh speaks of a mask that people in Iran wear. What does she mean by this?
- 3) Why did Azadeh Ganjeh leave Iran? What was the last straw for her?

### Sources and Further Reading:

- <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/purification-of-the-higher-education-system-and-jihad-of-knowledge-in-iran><https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/iran-universitaeten-studierende-100.html>
- <https://www.bpb.de/themen/naher-mittlerer-osten/iran/>

# Fragile Freedom: Academic Freedom at Risk

## What is academic freedom?

Academic freedom means that teachers, researchers, and students can explore ideas, teach, and share their thoughts without the fear of being punished or silenced by the authorities. It allows them to study and discuss any topic freely. This freedom helps to make learning and teaching more open and encourages the discovery of new knowledge, even if it puts the current government in question.

In Germany, the freedom to research and teach is protected by the constitution and an independent judiciary and researchers themselves have a major influence on which research projects are funded. But especially in countries that are under authoritarian rule, this is not the case. Scientists that do not align with state agency are being silenced, threatened and persecuted in many parts of the world. Today, around 3.6 billion people live in countries where academic freedom is completely restricted. This is the result of the Academic Freedom Index, in which researchers assess the de facto levels of academic freedom across the world.

Academic freedom is at risk for various reasons. Often, governments or political parties want to secure their power and maintain ideological control by restricting and instrumentalizing science and education. Religious beliefs and economic interests can also lead to the censoring of scholars that oppose the

ruling powers. The restriction of academic freedom is often a gradual process – which can ultimately have fatal consequences for scholars and societies as a whole.

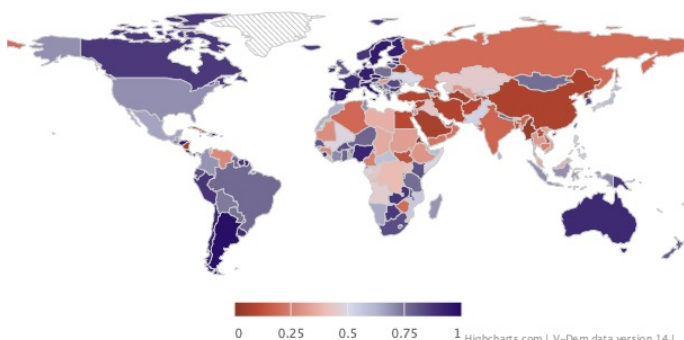
However: Even in democratic countries academic freedom is not absolute and always comes with certain responsibilities. Scholars must adhere to ethical standards, maintain academic integrity, and respect the rights of others. Additionally, while academic freedom protects scholars from undue interference, it does not shield them from criticism or debate. And of course, it is often politicians that decide on allocating funding to certain research programs.

The importance of academic freedom goes beyond schools and universities. It helps create knowledgeable and informed citizens, advances science and technology, and supports healthy democracies. By allowing free exchange and examination of ideas, academic freedom helps us search for truth and improve society.

## Discuss in groups:

- 1) How could science be restricted or misused for political purposes? Imagine and discuss a specific scenario. This can be a fictional scenario, a historical or recent example.
- 2) Can you imagine situations, where it would be good for society to regulate and even restrict scientific research?
- 3) Optional question: How is academic freedom and the education protected by political influences in Germany?

Academic Freedom Index (2023)



### Quelle Abbildung:

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard et al. 2024. "V-Dem Dataset v14" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds24>.

Spannagel, J., & Kinzelbach, K. (2023). The Academic Freedom Index and its indicators: Introduction to new global time-series V-Dem data. *Quality & Quantity*, 57: 3969–3989. doi:10.1007/s11135-022-01544-0