

**Symposium**  
**Defending The University: Academic Freedom in**  
**Central and Eastern Europe**  
June 20-21,2008

The issue of academic freedom may not be a priority in Western Europe, where universities have freedom and human rights are protected, but in the Arab world these freedoms do not exist.

Most countries in the Arab region are one-man states; even those who have democracy, only have formal and not real pluralism. With the exception of institutions such as the American University in Cairo and Beirut, all of our universities are controlled by the state they are in; the staff, students and administration are all closely watched by the government.

We believe that academic freedom is the key to solving many of the human rights problems that this region faces. Freedom of thought and conscience is the basic right, from which all other rights come. When people have freedom of thought, then they are able to ask for other human rights and they are able to understand the problems of their country.

It was with this in mind that we began our work in the area of academic freedom.

Our first phase began in two-thousand and four, when we began to prepare for our first conference on academic freedom in Arab universities. This conference was held in December two-thousand and four, with fifty professors participating, from universities in eleven Arab countries. After this conference, we published the research papers in a book.

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Our second phase focused on academic freedom in Iraq. Since the start of the war, around three hundred professors have been killed in sectarian and political violence in Iraq. We started to cooperate with the Iraqi League of Teachers in Iraqi Universities in two-thousand and five and organized a two-part conference on the issue. The first half was held in Baghdad in November two-thousand and five and the second in Amman in January two-thousand and six. The research from this conference was published in April two-thousand and six.

Our third phase occurred in June two-thousand and six. During a conference on criminal justice, a parallel meeting was held to consult with different professors. They expressed the need to establish an Arab society for academic freedom and asked the Amman Center to start to prepare such a group.

In the fourth phase, carried out in two-thousand and seven, we conducted research into academic freedom in Jordanian universities and established two websites; Academic Freedom Watch in Jordan and Academic Freedom Watch in the Arab World. These websites are basic; they contain information on academic freedom in both of these areas, but no dialogue forums, opinion polls or debate pages. These are areas we need to develop.

The fifth phase was holding a regional conference on Academic Freedom in Arab Universities. We prepared for this from the beginning of two-thousand and seven and it was finally held, thanks to our partners SAR, NEAR and UNU, in March two-thousand and eight. In parallel to this conference, on the third day, we formally established the Arab Society for Academic Freedom, with the academics attending the conference. To do so they approved the

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basic laws of the society, elected a board of directors and, from the board, selected an executive committee.

The aims of the Arab Society for Academic Freedom are; to disseminate information relating to academic freedom, to gather information on academic freedom in Arab universities, to research into academic freedom issues, to provide advice and support for academics whose freedom is being threatened, to encourage communication between academics and to set up a legal defence fund for academic work.

The sixth phase of our academic freedom work will be to establish the society and allow it to begin working towards the aims listed above. We have applied for funding to set-up the society with staff and to develop the website and we are hopeful that we can soon start real work with it.

As I mentioned before, academic freedom is such an important right and I hope that this conference will allow us to benefit from the experience of academic freedom issues in Central and Eastern Europe and hope that we can be of benefit to you, in sharing our experiences of academic freedom in the Arab region.

**Dr.Nizam Assaf,**  
**President of Arab Society for Academic Freedom**  
Vilnius, June 21, 2008