

Fighting to free detained scholars abroad a vexing issue for universities

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The plight of Concordia professor Homa Hoodfar in Iran has once again brought up the question of what universities can do to protect scholars detained abroad.

Barely a day had passed since Alexander Sodiqov had been jailed in Central Asia and his colleague Edward Schatz was already mulling a public campaign to bring Mr. Sodiqov home. “Right away, one of the things we wanted to do was start a petition,” said Dr. Schatz, an associate professor of political science at the University of Toronto. Mr. Sodiqov, a doctoral student working with Dr. Schatz, was detained in Tajikistan for nearly three months in 2014.

Mr. Sodiqov was held in the Central Asian nation on charges of treason and espionage while conducting research in the country. He was eventually [allowed to return to Canada](#) after Dr. Schatz and other academics raised the alarm with a campaign that steadily grew in size. The petition emphasized Mr. Sodiqov’s scholarly credentials, which helped signal that he was a neutral figure and not a “cause célèbre,” said Dr. Schatz.

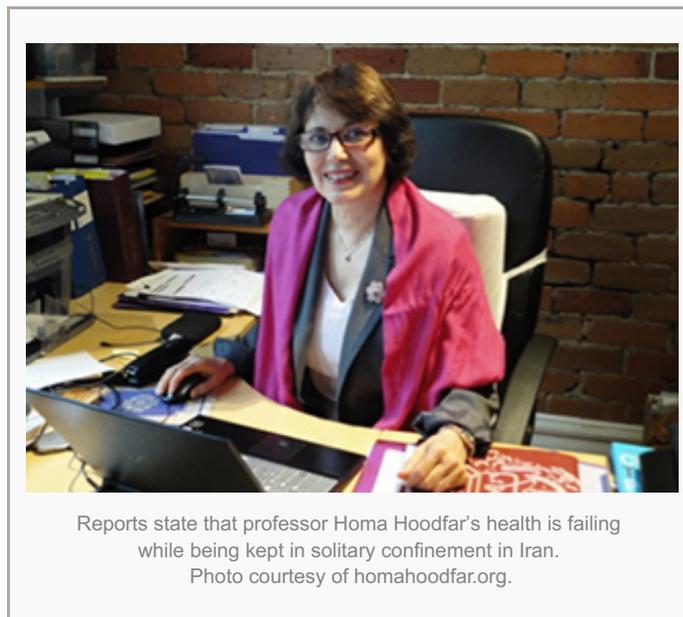
The question of how exactly administrators and academics should respond in the event that one of their own is detained abroad is a vexing issue Canadian universities are dealing with right now. Canadian-Iranian scholar Homa Hoodfar, a professor of sociology and anthropology at Concordia University, continues to be [detained in Iran’s Evin prison](#) since she was arrested and sent there on June 6. She was travelling the country for research and personal reasons. The Iranian government accuses her of acting against national security, a charge her defendants vehemently deny. Reports suggest that she has been held in solitary confinement and that her health is failing.

Meanwhile, U of T undergraduate student Tahmid Khan has been [detained in Bangladesh](#) since July 1 in connection with an attack on a café and has since been arrested. His family and friends insist on his innocence.

Their experience is unfortunately not unique: John Greyson, a Toronto filmmaker and associate professor at York University, and Tarek Loubani, an emergency room physician and assistant professor at Western University’s Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, were arrested in Egypt in 2013 and [held for 50 days](#) without charge. University of Alberta PhD candidate Curtis Riep was arrested in Uganda this past May while on a research trip, only to see the charges dropped days later.

Professors who have experienced and studied such incidents, and Canadian government officials speaking on background, say there is a clear understanding that universities have, at least on some level, a duty of care to their students, professors and others who travel abroad in their name. There is also broad agreement that preparation is key both for the traveller and the university administration. But they also say there is no one-size-fits-all answer as to what steps a university, its professors or its students should take if someone is detained.

Risk reduction meets academic freedom



According to government figures, there were around 1,300 consular cases last year involving Canadians – academic or otherwise – arrested or detained in a foreign country. Global Affairs Canada offers advice to students, professors and university administrators about the steps they can take to better prepare themselves for a potential incident before it happens. This takes the form of on-campus information fairs and presentations, as well as webinars, where department officials talk tips and answer questions.

“Students, teachers, and professors can request a personalized presentation or webinar tailored to their destination by emailing travel@international.gc.ca,” wrote spokesperson Jocelyn Sweet in an emailed response to questions.

Global Affairs Canada stresses four to-do items for Canadian travellers, including academics: report their upcoming trip to the [Registration of Canadians Abroad](#) service; buy travel health insurance; follow the department’s social media accounts for alerts; and check its travel advisories for the destination country. Travel advisories are frequently updated and each country is assigned one of four risk levels: “exercise normal security precautions,” “exercise a high degree of caution,” “avoid nonessential travel” and “avoid all travel.”

One straightforward way of limiting the risk to which scholars are exposed is for universities to ban travel to countries that have been assigned the top two risk levels. René Provost, a professor of law and founding director of the Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism at McGill University, said this is how McGill approaches the issue.

When he was running an international human rights internship program at McGill’s faculty of law, Dr. Provost said he had to suspend operations in Burkina Faso after armoured vehicles surrounded NGO offices. In another instance, the program had to suspend operations in Pakistan after the situation deteriorated there.

The problem, he admitted, is that professors and students need to go abroad for research, and research can’t always happen in perfectly safe areas. “It’s part of academic freedom to have that choice,” he said. “It would be no small thing, and not unproblematic, to suggest that universities could have a right to curtail the subject matter of a professor’s research by saying, ‘You can’t go there.’”

Channelling the power of education

In some cases, universities can be used as conduits to help keep open a channel of communication, said Dr. Provost. Universities understand they are “part of a collective endeavor to advance human knowledge, and that the negation of academic freedom anywhere is a threat to academic freedom everywhere,” he said.

That means universities could call on their counterparts in the country where the scholar is being detained, he said, to use their status in support of the right of scholars to conduct their work. “You are trying to find channels to the people who can make a difference, who can make decisions that will have an impact.”

In the case of Concordia’s Dr. Hoodfar, the situation is complicated by the fact that Canada doesn’t have formal diplomatic relations with Iran. Friends and acquaintances of Dr. Hoodfar have set up a website, homahoodfar.org, to raise awareness of her imprisonment and advocate for her release. A [petition](#) they started has been signed by more than 5,000 academics. Several of Dr. Hoodfar’s Concordia colleagues are also speaking out, most recently [at a press conference](#) held in Montreal on Sept. 7. The university, meanwhile, said it has little choice but to remain mum.

“We have assurances that Global Affairs Canada is working diligently through diplomatic channels on her situation and we will provide them with any assistance they require of us,” reads a statement to *University Affairs* from Concordia spokesperson Chris Mota. “We are not in a position to say much more because we don’t want to risk saying or doing anything that could interfere with the ongoing efforts to secure her release.”

As for U of T student Mr. Khan detained in Bangladesh, the U of T News sites says university president Meric Gertler wrote [a letter](#) to Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion in July expressing concern for the student’s welfare and confirming that Mr. Khan is “a student in good standing who is an active member of the university community.”

Crisis management team-building

U of T's Dr. Schatz said he believes there's merit to universities developing what he called a "rapid response team" in situations where a member of the university is detained abroad. It would be specific to the particular instance, he said, but would have common elements. These would include: someone with expertise in the location in question; someone who could liaise with the government; a legal team, including international legal expertise; and a public relations arm. A similar model exists in the private sector, where companies that send employees to troubled regions may have a crisis management team at the ready.

In the end, Dr. Schatz believes that scholars need to do a better job of communicating what it is they do. "We don't want people to see scholars as threats," he said. "We want to emphasize the positive value that scholarship brings and communicate that this is not just another highly cloaked effort in an information war."