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# Challenges and Strategies for Academic Research Freedom in Iranian and American Law

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of the challenges and strategies related to academic research freedom in the legal systems of Iran and the United States. Using a descriptive–analytical method and relying on library sources and legal documents, this study examines the legal structure, executive obstacles, and statutory guarantees of scientific research freedom in both systems. The findings indicate that although both countries emphasize the importance of academic freedom in their constitutions and ordinary regulations, there are fundamental differences in the nature and scope of legal protection, governmental intervention, and operational limitations. The most significant challenges in Iran include ambiguous legal restrictions, extensive governmental oversight, and the absence of strong supportive judicial precedent; whereas in the United States, although research freedom is protected under the First Amendment to the Constitution, challenges such as interference from private institutions, economic conflicts of interest, and political and social pressures are also observed. The study recommends revising domestic regulations, defining clear boundaries for academic freedom, formulating legal support mechanisms, and drawing on the successful experiences of the United States regarding university autonomy and tolerance for diverse scientific viewpoints.

**Keywords:** *academic freedom, research, Iranian law, U.S. Constitution, university autonomy, legal restrictions, higher education system*

## Introduction

Academic research freedom, as one of the pillars of scientific and social development, plays a fundamental role in elevating the cultural, economic, and political standards of any society. The realization of this form of freedom can promote innovation, evidence-based policymaking, and the improvement of higher-education quality. Nevertheless, academic research freedom in many societies faces serious challenges rooted in legal, political, economic, and social obstacles.

In Iran's legal system, ambiguous legal restrictions and extensive governmental oversight—especially in the humanities and social sciences—have hindered the full realization of researchers' freedom (1). This condition may lead to self-censorship, reduced research motivation, and a decline in the quality of scientific output. On the other hand, in the legal system of the United States, although academic freedom enjoys explicit constitutional support—



particularly through the First Amendment—challenges such as financial pressures, research-policy constraints, and national-security-related limitations continue to exert influence (2).

Numerous studies have examined different aspects of freedom of expression and academic research freedom, including the analysis of legal challenges and restrictions on freedom of expression in the international and Iranian legal systems (1), as well as studies addressing the challenges, strategies, and consequences of academic freedom in Iranian universities (2). These studies emphasize the necessity of safeguarding academic freedom and removing related obstacles; however, most have focused on single-country analyses, and comparative studies between Iran and the United States remain limited.

The central question of the present study concerns the essential challenges to academic research freedom in the legal systems of Iran and the United States and the strategies available to reduce these challenges. This study is significant because academic research freedom is recognized both as a fundamental human right and as a prerequisite for sustainable national development. Identifying weaknesses and challenges can support legal and administrative reforms. Moreover, comparative analysis of the Iranian and American legal systems can facilitate the transfer of successful international experiences and contribute to improving the status of academic freedom in Iran.

This study employs a descriptive–analytical method with a comparative approach. Research sources include domestic laws, policy documents, scholarly articles, and research reports related to Iranian and American legal systems.

## **The Concept of Academic Freedom**

Academic freedom is considered one of the foundational principles of advanced educational systems and plays a key role in the development of scientific research, innovation, and the enhancement of scientific and social standards. This concept guarantees a fundamental right for researchers and faculty members to carry out academic and educational activities without undue interference, restriction, or pressure (3).

Academic freedom refers to the scientific autonomy and discretionary authority of researchers, enabling them to conduct research, develop knowledge, and publish their findings in a safe, neutral, and free environment. This freedom includes the right to research, disseminate results, and access scientific resources and information. In many developed societies, academic freedom is not only a core value but also a catalyst for innovation, scientific growth, and the resolution of social challenges (3).

## **The History of Academic Freedom in Iran and the World**

### *Academic Freedom in Iran*

Academic freedom in Iran, as in many countries, has historically been regarded as a key principle in the development of higher education and scientific progress, experiencing numerous fluctuations from ancient times to the present. Institutions such as the Academy of Gondishapur during the Sasanian era reflect the long-standing scientific tradition and autonomy of Iranian scholarly institutions, where open debate and intellectual exchange—even in areas such as rational sciences and medicine—were prevalent (3).

However, political authoritarianism, religious transformations, and historical shifts have continuously reshaped the academic landscape, at times leading to the dominance of restrictive views toward academic freedom (4). During the Qajar period, with the dispatch of students to Europe and the establishment of Dar ul-Funun, academic freedom

and university autonomy achieved partial advancement, and efforts were made to emulate European models of higher education (5).

In the modern era, particularly after the Constitutional Revolution, universities have struggled with issues of autonomy and political intervention, which have often hindered the institutionalization of academic freedom (3, 4). Research indicates that academic freedom in Iran has been constrained for various economic, political, and cultural reasons, at times resulting in self-censorship or declines in research quality (5).

Overall, although Iranian academic institutions have sought to maintain their autonomy, political authoritarianism has remained a persistent challenge to the institutionalization of academic freedom (4).

### *Academic Freedom in the World*

The concept of academic freedom first emerged in the scholarly centers of Islamic civilizations and gradually found its way into European and American universities. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, universities were established in the Middle East and North Africa, creating a foundation for disseminating diverse methods of teaching and research (6).

With the formation of modern universities in the nineteenth century, the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt in Germany—particularly the principles of freedom in teaching and learning—came to be recognized as turning points in the development of academic freedom (7). These ideas later spread to universities in the United States and other parts of the world.

In 1915, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a landmark declaration emphasizing three domains of freedom: research, teaching, and scientific expression. This declaration remains the basis for university practice today (8).

In Europe, the academic models of Bologna (Italy) and Paris (France) represented two distinct structural traditions of academic freedom or restriction. However, religious structures and ecclesiastical authority often hindered the institutionalization of academic freedom (9). Over time, influenced by major transformations such as the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and scientific revolutions, Western societies gradually achieved university autonomy and ultimately the institutionalization of academic freedom (10).

In Anglo-Saxon systems—including England and the United States—university autonomy expanded, and academic freedom became a deeply rooted, unwritten tradition. During the second half of the twentieth century, the rise of authoritarian regimes, world wars, and the global promotion of human rights further strengthened academic freedom, with the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 playing a decisive role (11).

Overall, academic freedom today stands as one of the most significant pillars of modern universities—facilitating scientific innovation and protecting the independence of thought and knowledge production (6, 7).

### **Examining Legal and Executive Challenges to Academic Research Freedom in Iran**

Academic research freedom in Iran, as one of the fundamental rights of the academic community, has consistently faced numerous legal, administrative, and cultural challenges. These challenges include legal restrictions, political and social pressures, infrastructural weaknesses, and procedural selection mechanisms, each independently or collectively affecting the quality of research and the scientific environment (1, 3).

### *Legal and Regulatory Restrictions*

One of the most serious obstacles to academic research freedom in Iran is the existence of restrictive laws and regulations which, through broad and non-transparent interpretations, often limit the scope of researchers' activities—especially in the humanities and in research that challenges official policies or dominant cultural norms (1, 3).

**Content control of research:** The selection of scientific topics is sometimes restricted for political or ideological reasons (1).

**Governmental oversight:** Academic and scientific research is subject to various forms of oversight by state institutions, weakening scientific autonomy (12).

### *Political and Social Influences*

Political and social environments also shape academic freedom. In many cases, sensitive research topics face limitations or suspension due to governmental concerns or social pressure, creating conditions conducive to self-censorship among researchers (1, 13).

**Political pressure:** Research that does not align with governmental policy may be excluded from funding and institutional support (13).

**Social taboos:** Certain academic topics are considered difficult to pursue due to cultural sensitivities or prevailing social attitudes (3).

### *Weaknesses in Research Infrastructure*

Infrastructural deficiencies remain a significant barrier to the realization of academic research freedom. Insufficient funding, the structural dependence of universities, and ineffective policymaking have created substantial obstacles to research activity (14).

**Insufficient research funding:** Lack of adequate financial support can halt many research projects (13).

**Lack of university autonomy:** The continued administrative and financial dependence of universities on government limits academic independence (12).

**Weak policymaking:** The absence of supportive strategies and coherent research policy significantly affects academic freedom (14).

### *Restrictive Selection Processes and Executive Limitations*

Selective administrative procedures represent another serious obstacle in Iran's research environment. These processes—sometimes based on ideological or subjective criteria—further narrow the space for researchers (15, 16).

**Ideological selection:** Some researchers are excluded or restricted due to their viewpoints or sensitive research topics (15).

**Lack of administrative transparency:** Procedures for selecting, approving, and publishing research are often non-transparent and subject to administrative discretion (16).

Overall, academic research freedom in Iran continues to struggle with legal, structural, political, and cultural limitations. Overcoming these challenges requires fundamental legal reforms, the development of supportive

policies, and greater transparency in administrative processes. Achieving these goals can guide the nation's research environment toward sustainable development and improved research quality (3, 14).

### **Analysis of Challenges Related to Academic Research Freedom in the United States**

Despite benefiting from a strong historical foundation of legal protections and extensive scientific opportunities, academic research freedom in the United States has, in recent years, faced a series of new challenges. Restrictive policies, political pressures, the influential role of social media, universities' financial dependencies, and administrative intervention all impact the academic environment (17, 18).

#### *Political Pressures and Restrictive Legislation*

One of the principal challenges is the direct and indirect influence of state and federal policies on the content and methods of teaching and research. In recent years, new laws targeting discussions of sensitive issues—such as race, gender, and social identity—have been enacted in several states, restricting the diversity of academic discourse (18, 19). This trend has increased faculty self-censorship and discouraged engagement with controversial subjects, ultimately affecting the quality of research.

#### *Self-Censorship in Academic Settings*

Self-censorship, as a consequence of political and social pressures, has become a serious concern. Many faculty members and researchers avoid controversial issues due to fear of public backlash, professional sanctions, media pressure, or student protests (20). This phenomenon not only narrows the scope of research and teaching but also undermines academic dialogue and intellectual diversity.

#### *The Impact of Social Media*

Social media, with its extensive reach, amplifies monitoring and pressure on academic activity. Media attacks, online criticism campaigns, and digital harassment against faculty and researchers have significantly constrained independent research (21, 22). Increasing threats of dismissal, misinformation dissemination, and reputational damage exemplify these challenges.

#### *The Role of Universities and Financial Dependence*

Dependence on public and private funding has become a critical factor in shaping university research priorities. Pressure exerted by funding institutions—whether governmental or private—sometimes compels universities to avoid sensitive or critical projects to protect financial interests (17, 23).

#### *Administrative Intervention in Academic Decision-Making*

Interventions by university administrators and governing boards—including control over hiring, research project selection, and curriculum development—have reduced faculty independence. Such intervention limits academic choice and innovation and can even affect institutional credibility in global rankings (19, 20).

Overall, although academic research freedom in the United States is supported by extensive legal protections, challenges such as political pressure, social media influence, faculty self-censorship, financial dependence, and

administrative interference continue to pose threats. Preserving this freedom requires policy reform, increased investment in university autonomy, and strengthening professional ethics in higher education to promote free, independent, and impartial inquiry (18, 20).

## **Comparative Analysis of Academic Research Freedom in Iran and the United States**

Academic research freedom is shaped by the legal, social, and political contexts of each country, and there are fundamental differences in how this freedom is protected or restricted in Iran and the United States (5, 24).

### *Constitutional Context and Legal Protection*

In the United States, academic research freedom is rooted in the First Amendment to the Constitution and, based on the protection of freedom of expression, provides relatively secure conditions for researchers and academics (24). This legal protection enables faculty and researchers to address sensitive and controversial topics without facing the immediate threat of censorship or punishment.

In Iran, academic research freedom is more restricted. Research laws and regulations are often drafted under ideological and political considerations, and the state maintains close supervision over the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge (5). Research addressing sensitive issues such as human rights, political freedoms, or criticism of official doctrines frequently encounters legal and administrative obstacles.

### *Oversight and Censorship*

In the United States, researchers generally enjoy broad freedom in choosing research topics, and there is no compulsory state censorship of research content. Even in studies related to politics or economics, the direction of research is largely left to the discretion of the researcher (24).

By contrast, in Iran, extensive governmental oversight and censorship of sensitive topics are common, and researchers must take security and political considerations into account when selecting and publishing contentious subjects (5, 25). This situation also makes open access to information and scientific resources more difficult.

### *Administrative and Bureaucratic Barriers*

In Iran, administrative complexity and lengthy procedures for obtaining research permits constitute one of the major obstacles to academic activity. Ambiguous laws and sometimes contradictory standards create an unpredictable environment for researchers (26).

In the United States, such barriers are less prevalent, and the process of conducting studies and securing research approvals is generally more transparent and efficient for academics.

### *Impact of Political and Social Conditions on Academic Freedom*

Restrictive political and social conditions, especially in Iran, significantly affect academic freedom. Researchers who address sensitive topics such as human rights, social issues, or dissident thought may face legal consequences or scrutiny by enforcement bodies, which in turn reduces both the quality and quantity of scientific research in the country (5, 25).

In the United States, although social and political pressures exist, legal structures and academic culture provide more robust support for diversity in research topics (24).

**Table 1. Key Differences in Academic Freedom in Iranian and U.S. Law**

| Criterion         | Iran                                                                                                                                | United States                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scope of freedom  | Restricted by Shari'a and national security                                                                                         | Restricted by anti-discrimination law and research ethics                                                                                  |
| Censorship        | Prior restraint (e.g., obtaining approval from bodies such as the Ministry of Science)                                              | Post-publication (e.g., litigation or legal claims)                                                                                        |
| Topical diversity | Prohibition of research in fields such as criticism of state structures and gender studies not aligned with religious jurisprudence | Research in all fields, including highly sensitive areas (such as systemic racism), is permitted but may face political or social pressure |

### Practical Strategies for Strengthening Academic Research Freedom in Iran and the United States

To enhance academic research freedom in Iran and the United States, a set of measures at the levels of policymaking, university governance, and international cooperation is proposed that can help improve current conditions and promote this freedom.

#### *Legal and Structural Reforms*

In both countries, legal and structural reforms play an important role in strengthening academic freedom:

- **Revision of restrictive research laws in Iran:** Reviewing higher-education and research-related laws—especially those governing censorship of political, religious, and social topics—can create a more open scientific environment. Removing administrative limitations and enabling free research on controversial topics is essential.
- **Establishment of independent research institutions:** Creating research centers that operate at arm's length from direct governmental control can provide a platform for creative and innovative research.
- **Strengthening legal protections in the United States:** Legislation that protects researchers against political pressure and censorship should be reinforced. Likewise, oversight mechanisms are needed to prevent financial and political interference in scientific research at universities.

#### *Encouraging International Cooperation*

International scientific cooperation can foster knowledge exchange and reinforce academic freedom:

- **Developing joint research programs with Iran:** Designing joint educational and research programs with American institutions can facilitate the exchange of scientific experience and ease restrictions faced by Iranian researchers.
- **Encouraging participation in global scientific networks:** Facilitating international collaboration and reducing limitations related to sanctions can expand Iranian researchers' access to global resources.
- **Academic exchange programs in the United States:** U.S. universities can offer scholarships and research opportunities to Iranian scholars, thereby strengthening knowledge transfer and expanding collaborative networks.



Promoting a Culture of Independent and Free Inquiry

Strengthening the scientific community and enhancing public understanding of the importance of academic research freedom in Iran:

- **Public education on the importance of free inquiry:** Organizing seminars, workshops, and public educational sessions that emphasize the necessity of academic freedom.
- **Reducing social barriers:** Addressing social pressures and taboos related to specific research topics.
- **Holding public forums in defense of academic freedom:** In the United States, universities can organize seminars and advocacy campaigns to discuss the advantages of open inquiry and to defend the importance of academic freedom.

Strengthening the Role of the Media and Non-Governmental Organizations

Media and non-governmental organizations can act as intermediaries between researchers and the state and serve as defenders of academic freedom:

- **Creating platforms to support researchers in Iran:** Independent media and organizations can highlight sensitive research topics and help reduce restrictions by raising awareness and mobilizing support.
- **Utilizing independent media in the United States:** Providing open spaces for expressing scientific concerns and viewpoints, and empowering media outlets that can resist political pressure within the academic environment.

Table 2. Summary of Academic Freedom in Iranian and U.S. Law

| Aspect            | Iran                                        | United States                                                  |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Legal strength    | Preventive religious and ideological limits | Strong legal protection but with enforcement challenges        |
| Role of the state | Direct regulatory control                   | Indirect regulation (e.g., through funding mechanisms)         |
| Focus of policy   | Emphasis on “cultural security”             | Emphasis on legal protection with ongoing practical challenges |

Conclusion

Academic research freedom stands at the intersection of legal structures, political contexts, institutional arrangements, and cultural attitudes, shaping the overall quality and trajectory of scientific development in any society. The comparative examination of Iran and the United States reveals that, despite possessing higher-education systems with deep historical roots, the two countries differ significantly in how they conceptualize, protect, and operationalize this form of freedom. These differences directly influence the vibrancy of academic environments, the autonomy of researchers, and the potential for innovation and critical inquiry.

In Iran, the landscape of academic research freedom remains heavily influenced by ideological considerations, administrative oversight, and structural dependencies within the higher-education system. The persistent role of governmental control, coupled with ambiguous or restrictive regulatory frameworks, limits the space for scientific exploration, especially in fields perceived as politically or culturally sensitive. This environment inevitably narrows the range of topics that researchers can pursue, encourages self-censorship, and reduces the diversity of intellectual contributions. The long-term consequence is a stagnation in the capacity for independent knowledge production, hindering the nation’s readiness to adapt to global scientific trends and limiting its presence in international academic discourse.



Conversely, in the United States, academic research freedom benefits from a constitutional foundation and a long-standing institutional commitment to protecting free inquiry. However, this does not imply an absence of challenges. The evolving political climate, financial dependencies of universities, administrative interventions, and the broad influence of social media have created new pressures that limit the freedom of faculty and researchers in subtle yet significant ways. These pressures contribute to an environment where controversial topics may be avoided, where external actors can shape the research agenda, and where the boundaries of academic autonomy are continually renegotiated. Even in a system with strong legal protections, contemporary dynamics can restrict open inquiry, demonstrating that academic freedom is never permanently secured and requires constant vigilance and reinvestment.

Despite the clear differences between the two countries, several shared insights emerge. First, academic research freedom is not solely a legal question; it is deeply tied to cultural values, institutional norms, and the broader social climate. Societies that encourage critical thinking, diversity of thought, and tolerance for dissent tend to foster more robust academic environments. Second, academic freedom must be supported by transparent administrative procedures, independent research institutions, and equitable access to resources. Without these structural supports, even legally protected freedoms can lose their practical meaning. Third, both countries illustrate that academic freedom can be threatened from multiple directions—through governmental power, market forces, or social pressures—and thus requires a multifaceted approach to protection.

A comparative perspective also demonstrates the importance of international cooperation in promoting and sustaining academic freedom. Collaborative research programs, academic exchanges, and partnerships between universities across borders can serve as powerful tools for strengthening scientific independence. Through such interactions, researchers gain exposure to diverse methodologies, academic cultures, and systems of governance, enabling them to broaden their perspectives and challenge restrictive norms. For countries facing structural obstacles, participation in global scientific networks can provide alternative pathways for creativity, support, and validation.

In the case of Iran, adopting reforms aimed at reducing administrative barriers, protecting researchers from political interference, and ensuring greater institutional autonomy could significantly enhance academic vitality. Encouraging a culture of free inquiry—where criticism is viewed as an essential component of scientific progress—would create an environment more conducive to innovation and problem-solving. Supporting independent research institutions, reducing censorship, and promoting transparency would further help align scientific activities with global standards. Ultimately, strengthening academic freedom is closely linked to national development, as societies that empower researchers are better positioned to generate solutions to complex economic, social, and technological challenges.

In the United States, maintaining academic freedom requires ongoing engagement with the changing realities of political polarization, digital communication, and funding structures. Universities must proactively safeguard faculty autonomy by reinforcing ethical standards, establishing clearer boundaries between academic decision-making and political influence, and expanding mechanisms that protect scholars from external pressures. Addressing the effects of social media and promoting a culture of constructive dialogue on campuses can also help rebuild trust and openness in academic spaces. Furthermore, transparency in funding relationships and institutional decision-making would reduce the risk of financial motivations overshadowing intellectual priorities.

Looking ahead, both countries face an imperative to continuously renew their commitment to academic freedom. As global challenges—such as technological disruption, geopolitical shifts, environmental crises, and rising misinformation—require deeper scientific understanding and independent analysis, academic freedom becomes not merely a professional prerogative but a societal necessity. Only when researchers are free to question, critique, and innovate without fear of retribution can universities fulfill their mission as engines of knowledge and progress.

In conclusion, academic research freedom is a dynamic and evolving principle, one that must be actively cultivated, institutionally reinforced, and socially valued. The comparative analysis of Iran and the United States highlights that while their pathways and challenges differ, the underlying goal remains the same: to create academic ecosystems where intellectual curiosity flourishes, where truth-seeking is protected, and where scientific inquiry contributes meaningfully to the advancement of society. This requires not only legislative and structural reform but also a cultural commitment to openness, diversity of thought, and respect for the independence of the academic community. Only through such a comprehensive approach can both nations ensure that academic research freedom serves as a cornerstone of their future development and global engagement.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors equally contributed to this study.

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

### **Transparency of Data**

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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