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Internship with Scholars at Risk

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I began my internship at Scholars at Risk at the end of May 2024 and completed it in August. Having moved to the United States in 2023, this was my first internship experience in the country. On my first day at the Scholars at Risk office, I was both excited and nervous. However, upon arrival, I was warmly welcomed into a friendly and supportive environment. My supervisor, Amy Kept, gave me a tour of the office and introduced me to the staff. I also had the opportunity to meet Robert Quinn, the organization's executive director, and we had a brief, engaging conversation. With that introduction, it's important to provide some background on the organization itself. SAR was founded by Robert Quinn at the University of Chicago as a part of the Human Rights program in 2000. The main goal of this NGO is to “protect scholars and promote academic freedom.”<sup>1</sup> Basically, they promote academic freedom through Protection, Advocacy, and Learning. In their Protection program, they offer sanctuary to scholars facing threats, persecution, or censorship by securing research and teaching positions at partner institutions, enabling them to continue their work in a safe environment. Scholars At Risk Learning Team educates and empowers scholars and students to promote free expression through “providing handbooks, reports, courses and workshops, conferences and fellowships, bringing together faculty, students, higher education community members, and the wider public to discuss global

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars at Risk, "About Us," Scholars at Risk, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/about/>

and regional academic freedom climates.”<sup>2</sup> I was an intern in the SAR Advocacy team on the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project. Under this team, SAR reports the attacks on higher education by promoting academic freedom as a human right and advocating for accountability and protections for academic freedom. This team raises awareness and advocates for at-risk scholars, students, and higher education institutions. This report analyzes SAR’s approach to understanding and responding to hate, based on my experiences during the internship.

Many dictionaries define hate as “dislike somebody/something very much.” Human beings tend to identify themselves as “us” and “them,” distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups in order to survive and protect themselves from threats. This tendency to identify with one's own group while viewing others with hostility can be understood as a fundamental aspect of how hatred develops. This threat can be based on their identity, beliefs, or activism. In the context of SAR’s work, understanding hate requires recognizing why SAR is committed to supporting scholars. According to Robert, scholars are targeted because they are knowledge producers and generate new ideas and debates to bring about better change. They are at the forefront of critical thinking, challenging dominant ideologies, and questioning authority. This makes them vulnerable to threats from authoritarian regimes, extremist groups, and institutions. Therefore, Scholars become targets of hate, censorship, and violence. Scholars at Risks draw global and regional attention to the cause of those threats and facilitate scholarships within their institutions to protect them from life threats. This organization “protects scholars suffering grave threats to their lives, liberty, and well-being by arranging temporary research and teaching positions at institutions in our network as well as by

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars at Risk, "Learning," Scholars at Risk, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/learning/>

providing advisory and referral services.”<sup>3</sup> This statement clearly shows SAR’s understanding of hate as a force that can lead to life threatening acts, particularly when it targets scholars for their beliefs and academic work. SAR’s mission to help scholars shows their commitment to free speech, and academic freedom, which are fundamental to democracy and human rights. Therefore, one can conclude that hate has been used as a tool that silences critical thinking, beliefs, and ideas.

SAR’s advocacy team plays a crucial role in combating hate and academic freedom. This team “identifies, documents, and reports on attacks on higher education, including physical violence, imprisonment, prosecution, restrictions on academic travel, loss of positions, and other severe and systemic attacks through the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project.” By gathering and reporting those cases, SAR advocates for the rights of students and scholars targeted by hatred. This documentation can lead to policy changes, encouraging universities to adopt more inclusive practices that safeguard academic freedom and address hate-driven actions constructively. They also submit appeals and statements to relevant authorities and international bodies, including contributions to the UN Universal Periodic Review, advocating for releasing imprisoned scholars and encouraging states and the higher education sector to respond to threats against academic freedom. Through raising awareness, mobilizing international support, and protecting vulnerable scholars, SAR fosters a strong movement to fight against hate that threatens academic freedom. With that being said, during my time with the Advocacy team, we often shared updates on the work we had completed so far. Each team member would discuss the progress they had made on various projects, such as drafting reports, researching incidents of repression, or preparing

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars at Risk, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/#:~:text=Scholars%20at%20Risk%20protects%20scholars,providing%20advisory%20and%20referral%20services.>

advocacy statements. These meetings provided the opportunity to reflect on the challenges and progress of the team.

I worked closely with the Advocacy team in SAR, where my responsibility was primarily conducting research for the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project. I focused on documenting and analyzing incidents of academic repression in the United States. In the wake of the Israel-Palestine conflict, there have been significant moments in student activism across U.S. university campuses. In response, many universities and state authorities have imposed disciplinary measures, including warnings, arrests, and suspensions, in an attempt to restrict students' freedom of speech. One of my key contributions was in compiling data and drafting reports that highlighted instances of repression in response to political protests and student activism. I was writing 3-4 reports each week about student movements related to the Israel-Palestine conflict and analyzing the actions taken by universities in response. By documenting these incidents, I contributed to SAR's broader efforts to use this information in its public reports and advocacy campaigns. Throughout the drafting process, I received feedback from the senior member of the Advocacy team, Amy Kapit, which was invaluable in refining both the content and tone of the reports. One of the main pieces of feedback focused on ensuring that our reports are fact-driven, without escalating tensions. We had to be very mindful of the language used, avoiding emotionally charged or partisan rhetoric while remaining firm in our advocacy against hate. I had to make sure each report was reliable by providing more than five news articles, along with video and photo footage. In the final drafts, our reports did not just document incidents of hate and repression; they also urged universities to adopt policies consistent with their responsibility to ensure academic freedom and free expression on campus. I also participated in weekly advocacy team meetings, where I

presented the findings of my research, received feedback, and ensured that my work remained in line with SAR's broader mission and objectives.

Since its inception, this organization has made a profound impact by helping thousands of scholars and securing positions at host campuses worldwide. According to their 2022 Annual Report, they have helped “over 1700 scholars and created over 1700 positions at 300 host campuses, representing over \$42 million of support for colleagues under threat.” They offer legal referrals and career advice to over 2,000 scholars and conduct training workshops for both scholars and hosts.<sup>4</sup> In 2023 alone, SAR arranged 320 positions for threatened colleagues and played a pivotal role in securing the release of Patrick Zaki from Egypt. They have expanded their work building coalitions in every world region to protect and promote academic freedom and to “defend the right to think, question, and share ideas.”<sup>5</sup> SAR's efforts are a direct response to hate-driven attacks on academic freedom, addressing threats from governments and non-state actors across countries including Yemen, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> By building coalitions and advocating for academic freedom, SAR works to counteract hate and promote the fundamental values of free speech and free to think on a global scale.

While SAR has made significant strides in defending academic freedom and provided a lot of support for scholars under threat, the organization could enhance its impact by offering greater clarity on the specific types of speech it prioritizes for protection. I believe that theory should be a set of criteria for identifying what forms of speech are eligible for their support. A clearer

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars at Risk, Annual Report 2022, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/annual-report-2022/#:~:text=Free%20to%20Think%202022%2C%20the.supporting%20advocacy%20around%20the%20report.>

<sup>5</sup> Scholars at Risk, Annual Report 2023, <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/annual-report-2023/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

framework outlining the forms of speech or expression that qualify for protection would set expectations for scholars and institutions engaging with SAR. How SAR determines if certain speech incites violence or perpetuates hatred against a specific community is not entirely clear. The 1994 Rwandan Genocide is a stark example of how hateful speech can incite violence and lead to mass atrocities. In the lead-up to the genocide, media outlets, particularly the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), broadcast inflammatory propaganda that dehumanized the Tutsi population, referring to them as "cockroaches" and calling for their extermination<sup>7</sup>. This widespread dissemination of hate speech encouraged violence, leading to the massacre of 800,000 Tutsis.<sup>8</sup> A clearer framework from SAR on how it approaches such speech would set expectations and help align its mission with the realities of hate-fueled violence in academic and public discourse.

One notable aspect of SAR is its global network and collaborative approach to protecting academic freedom. SAR partners with universities, academic associations, non-governmental organizations, and unions worldwide to support scholars facing threats. Through these collaborations, SAR not only secures safe positions for scholars but also builds a global community dedicated to upholding the values of free speech, free to think, and academic freedom. This collective effort provides a global movement and encourages a culture of academic freedom and shared responsibility across borders. Therefore, I found it very impressive that SAR has established diverse stakeholders to address academic freedom on a global scale.

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<sup>7</sup>"Rwandan Who Called Tutsis 'Cockroaches' in 1992 Gets Life Sentence," Foreign Policy, April 15, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/15/rwandan-who-called-tutsis-cockroaches-in-1992-gets-life-sentence/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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