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Global

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U.A.E. Incident Raises Questions for Colleges That Open Campuses in Restrictive Countries

By *Katherine Mangan*

A New York University professor stopped on his way to conduct research in the United Arab Emirates said he wasn't completely surprised when he learned, while trying to board a plane at Kennedy International Airport this week, that he'd been [barred from entering the country](#).

He had, after all, [publicly criticized](#) the exploitation of migrant construction workers who helped build NYU's [new campus in Abu Dhabi](#), the emirates' capital. He knew that wouldn't sit well with local authorities who he said have kicked researchers out of the country for less.

But the decision to bar Andrew Ross, a [professor of social and cultural analysis](#), could have wider ramifications both for NYU and for other colleges that operate campuses in authoritarian countries, he and other higher-education experts said on Tuesday.

"Administrators at NYU have long insisted they have agreements with authorities to honor basic academic freedoms, but an incident like this is a clear violation of those principles," Mr. Ross said in an interview with *The Chronicle*. "It also illustrates how fragile or illusory it is to make such claims under the circumstances."

While NYU has too much invested in its [partnership in Abu Dhabi](#) to consider pulling out, the incident could prompt faculty members and students to question how much freedom they really

have, Mr. Ross said, given that the nation was willing to ban a prominent researcher who heads the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

"On the upside, it might be a wake-up call that could spark something positive," Mr. Ross added. "If I were an NYU administrator, I'd be trying not just to lift the ban but to have a public agreement, a very strong and firm commitment from the host authorities, to ensure that nothing like this could ever happen again and that they will indefatigably respect these basic academic freedoms that aren't observed anywhere else in the country."

So far, that's not the approach NYU appears to be taking.

John Beckman, a spokesman for NYU, wrote in an email that the university supports "the free movement of people and ideas," but he suggested that, in this case, the university's hands were tied. "Regardless of where NYU or any other university operates," he wrote, "it is the government that controls visa and immigration policy, and not the university."

In the five years the university has operated in Abu Dhabi, where new facilities were opened last year, none of NYU's faculty members or students have complained about restrictions on academic freedom even when they were researching labor and other sensitive topics, Mr. Beckman said.

On the Campus, Mixed Feelings

Feelings about the case on the Abu Dhabi campus were mixed on Tuesday. One faculty member, who asked not to be identified, fearing retribution, said many people there were worried.

"This obviously is not a visa and immigration issue, and I hope NYU will voice its concern to the emirate of Abu Dhabi," the professor told *The Chronicle*. "It does make me less confident in NYU's ability to guarantee our freedom of research and of expression."

But other scholars on the campus said that banning Mr. Ross, while wrong, didn't undermine the academic freedom of the faculty members working there.

Justin Stearns, an assistant professor who studies the intersection of law, science, and theology in the Middle East, isn't convinced that academic freedom is at stake.

"I don't understand the argument that, simply because one is an academic, one has the right to cross all borders," he said. "It is a fact of 21st-century life that nation-states control their borders and prevent people from entering."

Mr. Ross, he said, is a "scholar-activist" and was "wearing his activist hat, in which he's done a great deal of good in many ways." Mr. Stearns said that he sympathizes with the desire to push for reform in the labor system in the emirates, but that Mr. Ross's attitude and approach are not ones "we have adopted or found to be productive."

The impression he gets from his colleagues, he said, is that academic freedom is alive and well at the Abu Dhabi campus.

'Dodging the Issue'

In the United States, news of the ban traveled quickly through social media.

An expert on international higher education said the case raised questions about what other restrictions the Middle Eastern monarchy might impose on NYU researchers.

If Mr. Ross had been an instructor in Abu Dhabi, would he have been expelled from the country for his comments about its labor practices? asked Kevin Kinser, chair of the department of educational administration and policy studies at the State University of New York at Albany.

Would he be permitted to give a video lecture on the topic from

New York to students in Abu Dhabi?

"NYU should be seeking clarification on these points, and not just say that they have no control over visa and immigration policies," said Mr. Kinser. "That is dodging the issue, from my perspective."

Some pointed out that Mr. Ross wasn't going to the campus for any official events, so they don't see how his ban, however offensive, might violate the assurances made to researchers based in Abu Dhabi.

But Mr. Kinser said Mr. Ross was hardly a freelancer just dropping in. His work for years has focused on labor, Mr. Kinser said, so "it is completely consistent with even the most narrow definition of academic freedom for him to comment on the labor situation in the U.A.E. and seek to better understand the conditions at NYU's campus there."

Matt J. Duffy, who teaches journalism, media ethics, and international communication law, said the controversy might prompt NYU and professors in Abu Dhabi to "stop claiming that there's academic freedom" for professors in the United Arab Emirates.

Criticizing the country could get someone [expelled or banned](#), said Mr. Duffy, who has asserted that he was [kicked out of the emirates](#) in 2012 after a stint of teaching at Zayed University, where he wrote about media restrictions.

"While NYU values the free movement of ideas, they've set up shop in a country that doesn't," he said.

Philip G. Altbach, director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, said he finds it hard to believe that universities like NYU have had no problems with the stifling of professors' speech in places like the emirates. If nothing else, he said, self-censorship is probably common.

"Academics are on a shorter leash in those countries than would be the case in the U.S.," he said. "I don't think that's a reason not to engage with these countries, but Western universities should be more honest with themselves, their faculty and students, and the public about what they're getting into. It's not like working back here."

Ursula Lindsey, reporting from Morocco, contributed to this article.

Katherine Mangan, based in Austin, Tex., writes about community colleges, completion efforts, and job training, as well as other topics in daily news. Follow her on Twitter @KatherineMangan, or email her at katherine.mangan@chronicle.com.

132 Comments

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Richard · 2 days ago

When will Americans learn that other Americans can't save them when they are in a foreign country which lives by different laws in a different culture. American laws and mores don't apply abroad. Is that fact so difficult to understand?

14 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›



stannadel → Richard · 2 days ago

no, the issue is should a US university give prestige cover and establish a presence in a country that denies basic academic freedom to that university's faculty members.

44 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›



Richard → stannadel · 2 days ago

My point is this: NYU will never change Abu Dhabi. Either NYU will give in to the demands of a foreign culture and government, or NYU will abandon efforts to teach in that country and society. It's an "either-or" situation. You can't have it both ways.

10 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›



alme → Richard · 2 days ago

I think the point of Ross's research/commentary is exactly that--that NYU is complicit. The fact that the NYU spokesman merely said that the government not the university is responsible for who enters the country, without expressing any concern that one of the university's own faculty members was barred entrance says it all.

14 ^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›



stannadel → Richard · 2 days ago

exactly, under those conditions NYU should never have agreed to open a branch campus there.

13 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



khwoolley → stannadel · a day ago

"...under those conditions NYU should never have agreed to open a branch campus there."

Not entirely true. Avoiding countries because they are not the same as home campus does nothing to influence education globally. The point is to be truthful and transparent which is undoubtedly something that UAE does not wish to pursue when it makes them look bad.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Reyn → khwoolley · a day ago

Respectfully - I do not believe that we are successfully influencing global education anyway - instead we are diluting our product. If you add water to poison its weaker poison... Academic freedom is basic to what we do - and if our institutions are complicit in destroying it - then I have very deep worries about the future of education in any event.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



mahood → Richard · 7 hours ago

So why and what are they teaching there if their only choice is kowtow or leave?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jan Susan → mahood · 10 minutes ago

American universities are in other countries not to spread democratic thought but to make money. It would be nice to think that idealism is involved.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cleo2 → Richard · 2 days ago

Pastor Saeed Abedini has learned that lesson the hard way, and I imagine he is puzzled as he continues to languish in his jail cell that Iran and Hezbollah got omitted from this year's official government list of terrorist states and organizations. I understand it was a graphics mishap at the printers, that is what they say so I believe it.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



nacrandell → Richard · 2 days ago

Every culture has an identity issue when living or visiting another country and this specific incident is not unique.

Might makes right. The corruption involved in the exploitation of migrant construction workers building the Abu Dhabi campus of NYU obviously leads to higher involvement in the government and the responsible officials are safe from local accountability.

What is disappointing is the line from the article:

"Justin Stearns, an assistant professor who studies the intersection of law, science, and theology in the Middle East, isn't convinced that academic freedom is at stake."

Either Prof. Stearns is profiting from the relationship with Abu Dhabi and needs to defend the action, or he is oxygen deprived living up there with his lofty ideals. If there is a problem and the local authorities are ignoring it, why is NYU ignoring it?

see more

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



jenprof → nacrandell · 2 days ago

Alas, my guess is that Professor Stearns, who is an assistant professor, and, I would, I emphasize, guess, is not yet tenured, perhaps felt pressure to toe the NYU party line or at least to take a neutral tone and not to criticize his university. This is only a supposition on my part. Mr. Stearns misconstrues the issue and shifts the ground, it seems, from what Mr. Ross says and the evidence he has to a problem about "attitude." One would hope that NYU and any institution of higher learning will refuse to be complicit with the suppression of academic freedom on any of its campuses, no matter where they are, and will choose to support this basic principle that makes the free dissemination of research and ideas possible. Or will the sun be revolving around the Earth again soon?

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



khwoolley → jenprof · a day ago

jenprof,

I am a professor in the neighboring country of Qatar. We are all highly aware that what we say and do is carefully monitored. Even what I post on social media is "fair game" for my host country to look at critically at (and could get me kicked out of the country). It comes with the job. What seems to be missed in all of these comments is what are the results of these forms of censorship? Has anyone stopped to consider that maybe the UAE wishes to progress towards greater academic freedoms at their own time schedule and in ways that they think are best for their own people? Who are we to say CHANGE NOW? It is more complicated than that.

I think an example of radical change would be the Arab Spring - a necessary social reform at great cost to each of the local societies. Believe me, the Gulf countries do not want that to happen to them.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Reyn → khwoolley · a day ago

That does not change the basic premise - either a country has academic freedom, or it does not. If it does not, then NO Western university should have a campus there - because no such campus can effectuate positive change, one of the basic purposes of education.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



mahood → khwoolley · 7 hours ago

The question here has been how many workers died, and how many were deported, building the campus NYU so wanted. Not just the same as the abstract question of the

timing of academic freedom and what's good for the people the authoritarian powers in the UAE treat with such contempt.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



khwoolley → nacrandell · a day ago

"NYU is told what to do and as long as they are paid well, they will do it."

Nacrandell - at what risk? Financial benefit is not always what is at stake. Some of the transplanted foreign universities in the Gulf have had to pull out due to local changes imposed by government ministries or financial stakeholders (i.e. economic commitments falling through from sponsors). The real risk is that these institutions are sometimes asked to do things in a foreign country which they are unable to agree to. Why? Because they will lose their accreditation not only at the foreign location but also back home. I am not sure, but I think that NYIT in Bahrain had to pull out because of differences....

See <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com...>

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Socratease2 → Richard · 2 days ago

I think you missed the point, this is not a question of national sovereignty, no one is arguing that foreign governments don't decide their own domestic policies (at least until the US decides to change them forcibly). Is it so difficult to understand this is an issue concerning the key ability of professors and academics to freely discuss ideas and opinions within a university setting. And no one needed to be saved here, you are not commenting on an episode of "Locked Up Abroad," the professor was denied permission to board a plane to the UAE.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Richard → Socratease2 · 2 days ago

Precisely: The Abu Dhabi government has all the power. And the same government could do much worse things to NYU personnel within Abu Dhabi's borders.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie → Richard · 2 days ago

I am sorry to say that despite academics having average education times of > 20 years many still do not get it.

The laws of the host country apply on a branch campus. Look very carefully at what actually goes on in a country before setting up a campus there. A 5-star hotel fly in/fly out is not good enough.

Do not set up branch campuses in nasty countries because you are asking for trouble for both western staff and their locally employed colleagues. Perspectives are important - Boys throw rocks at frogs, to the boys it is sport but the frogs die in earnest.

The American employee of the UAE branch campus was simply denied re-entry. Think about what the consequences would have been if the article had been written by a local employed by the NYU branch campus or had co-authored the paper with the foreign devil.

10 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cleo2 → raymond_j_ritchie · 2 days ago

A moral dilemma: Is NYU the bigger culprit here, or is the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, which accredited

NYU-Abu Dhabi and other such regional "universities?"

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Robert W Willson → Richard · 2 days ago

You have nailed it Richard. It never fails to amaze me when i encounter an american overseas who aggressively asserts US rights and privileges to third world authorities.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Michael Barbas → Richard · a day ago

I agree, but you see the issue is, this is not only happening with American faculties teaching in authoritative countries. I know a Professor from Eastern Europe, actually a former chief Engineer of the MIR Soviet Union space station, and with something more than 130 publications in International journals globally on the area of Turbines and Aerodynamics who was kicked out of the college and country just for telling his students that he cannot give them more marks than what they deserve. The problem is, foreign universities (not restricted only to American), should think very well before establishing branches to countries that freedom of speech is not allowed. Money is not everything.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie · 2 days ago

All this shows is how silly people can be about international branch campuses. Political correctness howls down anyone with the temerity to be sceptical of international branch campuses. There is also an unwritten rule in the Middle Eastern branch campuses and universities that they never allow western academics to stay for more than about 2 years. His time was up so they found an excuse to get rid of him.

I personally have only ever seen one international branch campus that was at all functional and that was the Sunway branch campus of Monash University in Malaysia.

The Australian experience of international branch campuses can be summed up as ranging from the disappointing to the disastrous. People just do not learn.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



alme → raymond_j_ritchie · 2 days ago

I don't understand the connection you're making between political correctness and international branch campuses. NYU's motivations for international expansion have been widely criticized on/from the Left-- Ross is a perfect example.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie → alme · 2 days ago

The political correctness is that you simply get howled down as culturally insensitive if you accurately describe conditions in such countries or the real nature of their culture. By the way political correctness is not the sole preserve of crazy leftists.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Reyn → raymond_j_ritchie · a day ago

I am a Leftist - but I am not crazy. Being on the Left is primarily a particular position about economics, social justice, and equality for minorities (at least where I live). I may differ from a conservative, but how does that make me crazy?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie → Reyn · 20 hours ago

My life experience of leftists has been the comical kids at elite universities from expensive private highschools with marble-in-the-mouth accents blathering about the oppressed. It is very hard not to laugh at them. They are also insufferable snobs if you tell them that both your parents could barely read and write. Never interested in social justice for the likes of me. Sure I was poor but I was not suitably pathetic.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Mourinho → raymond_j_ritchie · a day ago

Perhaps what you say about branch campuses in the Middle East getting rid of faculty after two years is true, that certainly does not apply to other institutions such as Zayed University, American University of Sharjah, Ajman University of Science and Technology and others in the UAE.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



overseas → Mourinho · a day ago

Working abroad I have to respect and follow the local rules. Workers in the US have to follow US rules. Many foreign colleagues live in fear they ever donated to the wrong charity and will be labeled terrorist in the US. They have quit donating altogether in many cases. This is the pot calling the kettle black. We don't just stop people from coming to the country, we send them to a resort in Cuba.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie → Mourinho · 20 hours ago

I think you are being a little too positivist over the more prestigious outfits in the Middle East. The turnover time is about 2 years for nearly all faculty and post-docs in the Middle East. It is a deliberate policy. Your "certainly does not apply to other institutions" is far too generous.

I have been working in Thailand for 4 years. The turnover of farangs in universities here is about 2 years but that is primarily because most are English teachers with at most a masters degree. Those who do something other than teach English tend to stay a lot longer. Retiring in Thailand is a real option because the culture is hospitable. Retiring in the Middle East is not an option.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jan Susan · 2 days ago

Is anyone surprised? Schools in countries that are not free are going to play by their own rules. American institutions that think they can superimpose their own beliefs are naive or unwilling to see the truth. Good for Prof. Ross for speaking out. Shame on NYU for being complicit in the subjugation of workers.

30 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern → Jan Susan · 2 days ago

" Shame on NYU for being complicit in the subjugation of workers."

As I posted and cited in yesterday's CHE coverage of this issue - see <http://chronicle.com/blogs/tic...> - the New York Times revealed last spring that one of NYU's very own board members is the owner of the

spring that one of NYU's very own board members is the owner of the general contractor who built NYU-AD using (allegedly) horrid labor practices. NYU has been more than complicit in all of this.

14 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



bdavi52 → Unemployed_Northeastern · 2 days ago

You should stop picking up all those rocks and looking beneath them. Yuck. Lots of creepy-crawlies under there.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern → bdavi52 · 2 days ago

Sometimes I think I am too cynical. Then I pick up another rock and find I am not yet cynical enough.

11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



bdavi52 → Unemployed_Northeastern · 2 days ago

I think we eventually get to a point at which we believe nothing as it is first presented... a point at which we doubt every quoted stat, and see every 'talking head' as just another Elmer Gantry, selling us some shiny, new thing.

But then, if we're lucky, we get to go fishing...take a walk in the woods...read a good book....find another classic Calvin & Hobbes (and wrestle our own Tiger).

"...and then we don't feel....so bad!"

It is, after all, the 50th Anniversary!

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern → bdavi52 · 2 days ago

Have you heard of the book and documentary "Merchants of Doubt"? I think there are now merchants of doubt and lobbyists & think tanks-for-hire for every substantial industry in the world. Spin numbers, prevaricate, cast aspersions and doubt on the traditional experts. Wash, rinse, repeat.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



bdavi52 → Unemployed_Northeastern · 2 days ago

It's what we do. Truth, it seems, is a relative commodity.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Guest → Unemployed_Northeastern · a day ago

< my roommate's step-aunt makes \$84 /hour on the laptop . She has been fired from work for seven months but last month her pay was \$12154 just working on the laptop for a few hours. you can look here >;.View first...

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Unemployed_Northeastern → Guest · a day ago

Speaking of another rock...

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



raymond_j_ritchie → Unemployed_Northeastern · 20 hours ago

True enough. I try to be pessimistic about the world but I am sometimes astonished that that my imagination to too feeble to realise just how bad things can be.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cleo2 → Unemployed_Northeastern · 2 days ago

You've posted a version of this several times over the past couple of days. You (and Jonathan Capehart of the Washington Post) are discovering the amazing aptitude of those on the left to stick their fingers in their ears and say "nah nah nah."

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



southerntransplant → Cleo2 · 2 days ago

This has what to do with left-right politics, exactly?

I'll bet if you had enough time you'd tell us how this was all Obama's fault.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cleo2 → southerntransplant · 2 days ago

Not this incident, but He certainly contributed to the one Capehart is being lambasted for by those who were his friends on Monday. Woe to those who dare to speak the truth.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



southerntransplant → Cleo2 · 2 days ago

Wonder Tinfoil Helmet Powers - activate!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Wael Murray → Jan Susan · a day ago

I could not agree with this statement more. In countries that consider the elements of democracy " an evil taboo" and an enemy to their autocratic regimes, Americans will fail in trying to spread modern ideas of public opinion domination and modern governance principles

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Tom Moore · 2 days ago

We should not be engaging with places in which women's rights are limited or non-existent, and where Americans do not have the right to practice their own religions.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



BobL33T → Tom Moore · 2 days ago

"We should not be engaging with places in which women's rights are limited or non-existent" That might include most of the world, including your own country at times.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Tom Moore → BobL33T · 2 days ago

Indeed. But it's most evidently true for the fundamentalist Arab world.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



nacrandell → Tom Moore · 2 days ago

lol - or at Bob Jones University.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Cleo2 → nacrandell · 2 days ago

Would you like to sign my petition insisting that Bob Jones University cease and desist from confiscating the

drivers' licenses of female students upon arrival? I have 10,000 signatures so far.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

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