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Pan-Arab ethics charter 'will protect academic freedom'

'Best democracies based on science', princess of Jordan says

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An ethical charter for Arabic science will protect researchers in a region plagued by freedom of expression problems, according to the Jordanian royal who acts as its patron.

Unveiled at the World Science Forum in Budapest, Hungary on 22 November, the Charter of Ethics of Science and Technology in the Arab Region will "for the first time" protect "good science and dedicated scientists" across the Arab world, said Princess Sumaya bint Hassan.

Hassan said the charter "offers an appropriate and responsive way to impose order only where it is needed" and that while scientists "must serve society's greater interest...they must also be left alone".

The document specifies broad protections for scientists and the work they do. Its authors hope it will inspire further discipline and country-specific charters in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

Many nations in the region have a poor track record on academic freedom.

Saudi Arabia, where the charter was partly written, has seen the arbitrary detention, torture and execution of researchers in 2019, according to report from the global observatory Scholars at Risk published on 19 November.

Half the 22 members of the Arab League, the institutional sponsor of the charter, saw verified attacks against academic freedom in 2019, according to Scholars at Risk. The league counts a number of absolute monarchies in its membership. Princess Hassan's Jordan—a constitutional monarchy—does not feature on the 2019 list, although Scholars at Risk has recorded incidents in the country in recent years.

Responding to a question from Research Professional News, Hassan agreed that democracy is beneficial for science and that, in return "the best democracies are supported by a sound science agenda".

She said the benefit of democracy to science was a "good question" to ask in the Hungarian capital. The Central European University was forced to leave Budapest this year after pressure from the Hungarian government.

Speaking at the launch, Ghaith Fariz, director of the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science in the Arab States, said the charter had been developed with reference to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But, he said, it will be up to countries to "adapt" the charter to their own legal frameworks.

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