



Universities as Contested Spaces: Student Political Action under Authoritarian Repression and Wartime Securitization in Iran after the 2025–2026 Uprisings

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Abstract

Universities occupy a paradoxical position within authoritarian systems as sites of both ideological reproduction and political contestation. This article examines how Iranian universities were transformed during and after the 2025-2026 protest cycle, a period marked by the convergence of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization. Drawing on student testimonies, movement-generated reports, digital activist archives, and human rights documentation, it investigates how expanding security governance reshaped university life and how students responded to these transformations. The article advances two conceptual contributions. First, it develops the concept of universities as security infrastructures to explain how higher education institutions become organizational sites through which surveillance, disciplinary control, intelligence gathering, and political regulation are institutionalized. Second, it introduces relational moral shock to explain how political consciousness and sustained commitment emerge through witnessing harm inflicted on socially significant others rather than through direct victimization alone. The findings show that Iranian universities became increasingly embedded within security governance through surveillance, criminalization, disciplinary intervention, and information management. Yet students continued to exercise agency through solidarity, witnessing, remembrance, documentation, and collective meaning-making. By conceptualizing universities as contested political spaces, the article demonstrates how authoritarian governance and student agency are mutually constituted through ongoing interaction. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship on authoritarianism, securitization, higher education, and social movements by showing how repression not only restructures institutions but also shapes the relational processes through which political subjectivities, collective identities, and forms of resistance are produced and sustained under conditions of intensified crisis.

Keywords: Authoritarianism; Higher Education; Securitization; Student Activism; Iran; Moral Shock; Surveillance; Contentious Politics

Introduction

Universities occupy a distinctive position within authoritarian systems. Beyond their educational function, they are institutions where knowledge is produced, identities

are formed, and future elites are educated. Because they bring together large populations of politically conscious young people and intellectuals, universities frequently become arenas in which struggles over authority, legitimacy, citizenship, and social change unfold [1-3]. Authoritarian



governments therefore often view higher education simultaneously as a resource for ideological reproduction and a potential source of dissent, subjecting it to surveillance, regulation, disciplinary intervention, and political control.

This dynamic has been particularly visible in Iran, where universities have long occupied a central place in public life. Since the mid-twentieth century, Iranian students and academics have played important roles in major episodes of mobilization, including the oil nationalization movement, the 1979 Revolution, the 1999 student protests, the 2009 Green Movement, the 2017-2018 protests, and the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising [4-7]. Iranian campuses have consequently served as spaces where intellectual inquiry and activism intersect, making them central to broader struggles over state power and social justice.

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, universities became key targets of ideological regulation. The Cultural Revolution of the early 1980s sought to restructure higher education through faculty purges, curriculum reforms, restrictions on academic freedom, and intensified surveillance [8]. Subsequent governments continued to regulate university life through censorship, disciplinary sanctions, restrictions on student organizations, and expanding security oversight Golkar, Kamrava, [9], Mahdavi. Yet these efforts repeatedly failed to depoliticize campuses. Instead, universities remained important arenas through which collective identities formed, critical ideas circulated, and resistance was organized.

Existing scholarship has documented both the significance of Iranian universities and state efforts to regulate higher education through ideological control, disciplinary governance, and securitization Golkar, Matin-Asgari, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi. However, this literature has largely examined student activism and state repression as separate phenomena. Less attention has been devoted to how universities are transformed when authoritarian repression converges with wartime securitization. In this article, wartime securitization refers to the expansion of surveillance, disciplinary governance, and exceptional security measures justified through ongoing military conflict and national security concerns. Consequently, we know comparatively little about how universities function simultaneously as sites of governance, security management, and collective action during periods of intensified crisis. The 2025-2026 protests provide a critical opportunity to examine these dynamics because they unfolded amid both intensified repression and expanding security governance.

The nationwide protest movement that emerged in December 2025 and intensified throughout 2026 once again placed universities at the centre of contention [10-11]. Unlike

earlier episodes of student-led mobilization, the protests initially emerged within wider society before spreading to campuses. As demonstrations expanded across the country, authorities responded through internet shutdowns, mass arrests, campus closures, disciplinary sanctions, and heightened surveillance [12,13]. Human rights organizations documented the growing securitization of higher education through student summonses, suspensions, expulsions, digital monitoring, and security-related prosecutions [14,15]. At the same time, escalating regional conflict and wartime security measures intensified state regulation of academic spaces, further embedding universities within broader security agendas.

These measures did not eliminate student engagement. Internet shutdowns and restrictions on public assembly increased the importance of campuses as physical spaces where students-maintained communication networks, organized collective action, circulated information, and sustained solidarity. Universities became sites of assemblies, sit-ins, memorial gatherings, and other forms of collective action that connected students to the broader protest movement Ramezani, 2026. Consistent with scholarship emphasizing the importance of physical spaces for sustaining collective action under repression Tilly, Tarrow, campuses became essential infrastructures of resistance when alternative channels of communication were severely constrained.

The protests also revealed a significant transformation in the relationship between higher education and dissent. Opposition increasingly extended beyond students to include academics who challenged official narratives surrounding state violence and legitimacy. Following the January 2026 crackdown, academics reportedly documented human rights violations, commemorated those killed, and contested state representations of protesters as security threats Ramezani, [16]. Simultaneously, authorities sought to project images of institutional consensus and support for repression. These competing efforts to shape political reality and collective memory underscore the university's significance as a site of knowledge production, symbolic power, and legitimacy [17-18].

Against this backdrop, the article examines how Iranian universities have been transformed by the convergence of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization following the 2025-2026 uprisings. It asks: How have Iranian universities been transformed by the convergence of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization, and how do students respond to these transformations?

Drawing on student testimonies, movement-generated reports, human rights documentation, and digital activist

archives, the article conceptualizes universities as contested political spaces where state efforts to regulate academic life encounter ongoing forms of student action. Rather than treating universities as either sites of repression or resistance, it examines how authoritarian governance and student agency are co-produced through ongoing interaction. The analysis explores how students navigate surveillance, disciplinary sanctions, expulsion, imprisonment, and the constant possibility of violence while sustaining collective identities, political memory, and solidarity.

To understand these developments, the article advances two interconnected conceptual interventions. First, it develops the concept of universities as security infrastructures to explain how wartime securitization transforms higher education institutions into organizational sites through which surveillance, disciplinary control, intelligence gathering, and political regulation are enacted. Second, it introduces the concept of relational moral shock to account for how political consciousness and sustained commitment emerge through witnessing harm inflicted upon socially significant others, rather than through direct victimization alone. Together, these concepts extend scholarship on authoritarian governance, securitization, and student activism by demonstrating how repression simultaneously restructures university institutions and shapes the relational processes through which agency is produced and sustained. Through the framework of contested political spaces, the article shows how state power and student agency are continuously constituted through their interaction, producing the political life of contemporary Iranian universities.

Theoretical Framework: Universities as Contested Political Spaces under Authoritarian Repression and Wartime Securitization

Universities occupy a distinctive position within authoritarian systems. While they serve important economic and developmental functions through knowledge production and professional training, they also provide spaces where critical ideas, political identities, and collective action can emerge. Consequently, authoritarian governments often regard universities as both valuable state institutions and potential sites of opposition Altbach, Boren.

Research on authoritarian governance shows that regimes maintain power not only through coercion but also through the regulation of institutions and social life [19-20]. Universities are particularly significant because they concentrate educated youth, intellectuals, and future elites. Authorities therefore regulate them through surveillance,

disciplinary mechanisms, and restrictions on political activity, seeking both to manage dissent and shape the production of knowledge and political participation.

In Iran, universities have long been sites of political contestation. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, authorities have relied on political monitoring, restrictions on student organizations, and disciplinary sanctions to manage campus politics Arjomand, Golkar, Sadeghi-Boroujerdi. Yet recurring waves of student activism demonstrate that universities remain arenas where state control is continuously negotiated and challenged.

Rather than treating authoritarian governance as complete domination, this study adopts a relational understanding of power. Following Foucault (1980), power operates through institutions, disciplinary practices, and everyday forms of governance while simultaneously generating possibilities for adaptation and resistance. State efforts to regulate university life therefore reshape, rather than eliminate, political action. This perspective shifts attention away from whether repression succeeds or fails and toward the processes through which governance and political agency mutually constitute one another. Universities are particularly revealing sites for examining these processes because they concentrate administrative authority, knowledge production, and political subject formation within a single institutional setting.

Wartime Securitization and Universities as Security Infrastructures

While political regulation is endemic to authoritarian higher education, periods of crisis often intensify existing mechanisms of control. Securitization theory offers a useful lens for understanding this process. According to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), securitization occurs when issues are framed as existential threats that justify measures extending beyond ordinary governance. Educational, social, and political activities can thereby be redefined as matters of security. In this study, wartime securitization refers to the expansion of surveillance, security governance, and exceptional administrative interventions justified through military conflict, national security threats, or emergency conditions. The term encompasses both the construction of threats and the incorporation of security priorities into everyday institutional practices.

Higher education institutions are particularly vulnerable to such dynamics because student activism, intellectual criticism, and collective organization can be represented as threats to political order. Bigo (2002) demonstrates that securitization operates through institutional routines that normalize surveillance and expand the authority of security

actors. Agamben's (2005) notion of the state of exception further suggests that crises facilitate the normalization of extraordinary interventions, allowing activities such as political discussion, memorialization, collective organization, and information sharing to be recast as security concerns. Existing scholarship has largely approached universities as objects of securitization, emphasizing how security measures are imposed upon academic institutions. Although this perspective illuminates processes of surveillance and intervention, it offers less insight into the institutional role universities themselves may play in sustaining security governance.

This article therefore conceptualizes universities as security infrastructures. The concept shifts analytical attention from the effects of securitization on universities to the ways higher education institutions participate in organizing and reproducing security practices. Under conditions of wartime securitization, administrative procedures, disciplinary classifications, information management systems, and coordination with security actors become mechanisms through which surveillance and political regulation are enacted. From this perspective, the university is not simply governed through security logics; it also contributes to their implementation and circulation. Security governance becomes embedded within routine organizational processes, blurring the distinction between educational administration and political control. Conceptualizing universities as security infrastructures thus extends securitization scholarship by highlighting the institutional mechanisms through which security priorities are translated into everyday governance practices.

Relational Moral Shock and Political Agency under Repression

Although authoritarian repression constrains collective action, collective engagement often persists under adverse conditions [21]. Universities are important sites in this process because they facilitate dense social networks through which students interpret political events and develop shared understandings of injustice and responsibility. Activism therefore extends beyond visible protest to encompass mutual support, information sharing, memorialization, and symbolic forms of opposition.

Research on social movements has long emphasized the role of emotions in mobilization Jasper. Moral shocks occur when individuals encounter events that disrupt previously held assumptions about justice and legitimacy [22-23]. Under authoritarian rule, however, such experiences are frequently mediated through social relationships rather than direct victimization. The arrest of classmates, the suffering of family members, or the disappearance of friends may

generate profound emotional and political responses even among those who have not themselves been targeted [24-25].

This article introduces relational moral shock as a concept for understanding how experiences of injustice become politically consequential through social ties. Whereas conventional formulations of moral shock focus primarily on an individual's encounter with wrongdoing, repression in authoritarian settings is often experienced indirectly through networks of friendship, kinship, and shared community. Students may become politically affected not because they are personally targeted, but because violence is directed at people whose lives are bound up with their own.

The analytical focus therefore shifts from the shocking event itself to the obligations, attachments, and forms of responsibility activated by witnessing harm inflicted on socially significant others. Commitment emerges through care, moral responsibility, and a recognition of interconnected vulnerability. Repression acquires political meaning not only through personal experience but also through the realization that violence directed at others threatens relationships, communities, and shared futures. By foregrounding these processes [26-27], relational moral shock helps explain the persistence of commitment even when opportunities for overt collective action are severely restricted.

This perspective resonates with Scott's (1990) argument that resistance often operates through everyday practices rather than open confrontation. Student engagement should therefore be understood not only in terms of participation in demonstrations but also through the labour of sustaining solidarity under conditions of surveillance and risk. Practices of care, remembrance, witnessing, [28] documentation, and mutual support acquire political significance because they preserve oppositional communities and maintain collective memory despite repression. The two concepts developed in this article illuminate interconnected dimensions of political life under authoritarianism. Universities as security infrastructures captures the institutional reconfiguration of higher education as security concerns become embedded within administrative routines and organizational practices. Relational moral shock, by contrast, explains how students interpret and respond to these transformations through relationships of care, obligation, and shared vulnerability. Considered together, they reveal how institutional restructuring and political subject formation unfold in tandem.

Universities as Contested Political Spaces

Taken together, the preceding arguments suggest that universities are best understood as contested political spaces:

institutional arenas in which authoritarian governance, wartime securitization, and student activism shape one another. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1988) conception of universities as fields structured by struggles over authority, legitimacy, and symbolic power, higher education institutions can be understood as sites where competing actors seek to define the boundaries of acceptable knowledge, political participation, and social order.

This framework integrates the article's three analytical dimensions. Authoritarian governance explains how universities are regulated; wartime securitization accounts for the intensification and institutionalization of security interventions during periods of crisis; [29,32]- and relational moral shock illuminates how students develop and sustain commitments under conditions of surveillance and repression. More specifically, universities as security infrastructures captures the institutional reconfiguration of higher education, while relational moral shock identifies a mechanism through which students interpret and respond to these transformations. Considered together, these dynamics reveal how institutional restructuring and political subject formation unfold simultaneously rather than as separate processes.

From this perspective, universities are neither passive recipients of state power nor autonomous spaces of opposition. Efforts to securitize campus life generate new constraints on organization, expression, and association, but they may also create conditions that encourage new forms of solidarity, documentation, remembrance, and collective engagement Tarrow, della Porta. Surveillance, disciplinary sanctions, arrests, and expulsions reshape the terrain on which collective action occurs without eliminating the possibility of dissent. At the same time, student responses influence how authority is exercised and justified within university settings. Universities in contemporary Iran therefore occupy a dual position. They function as sites through which security governance is institutionalized and as arenas where alternative understandings of justice, belonging, and political responsibility continue to emerge. Rather than asking whether repression succeeds or fails, this framework directs attention to the processes through which authority, resistance, identity, and collective action are negotiated in everyday university life under conditions of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization.

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative research design to examine student political action in Iran under conditions of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization. Rather than seeking demographic representativeness or statistical generalization, the

study investigates how students interpret experiences of repression, construct moral responses to perceived injustice, and engage in individual and collective forms of political action. The objective is not to generate universal claims about Iranian students but to develop a contextually grounded understanding of how political agency is experienced and enacted within highly constrained political environments. The analysis is guided by two interconnected conceptual perspectives. First, [33-34] it conceptualizes universities as security infrastructures through which surveillance, disciplinary intervention, and political regulation are institutionalized. Second, it employs the concept of relational moral shock to examine how political commitments emerge through relationships of care, responsibility, and shared vulnerability. These perspectives function as sensitizing concepts that inform interpretation while allowing themes to emerge inductively from the empirical materials.

The study examines the transformation of university governance, academic life, and student activism during the 2025-2026 protest cycle in Iran. The case is defined by the convergence of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization and is investigated through documentary and testimonial evidence drawn from multiple higher education institutions. Guided by the concept of universities as contested political spaces, the study explores how state efforts to regulate academic life interact with students' efforts to sustain political agency under conditions of surveillance, coercion, and political uncertainty. Given the restricted research environment and the study's focus on lived experiences of repression, an interpretive qualitative approach is particularly well suited to examining how students understand, navigate, and contest institutional transformation. Rather than treating narratives solely as factual accounts, the analysis approaches them as interpretive sites through which political experiences, identities, and collective action are understood, negotiated, and articulated.

Data Sources and Analytical Materials

The analysis draws on three complementary sources of qualitative data. First, it incorporates two reports produced by Iranian university movement organizations during 2026, documenting arrests, disciplinary proceedings, suspensions, expulsions, restrictions on academic freedom, and expanding security interventions across multiple universities. Second, the study utilizes archival material from a student-run Telegram channel monitoring developments in Iranian higher education. The archive contained more than thirty posts published between January and July 2026, of which thirteen were selected for detailed analysis. These materials documented protests, disciplinary actions, security interventions, student statements, and university-specific events. In a context characterized by censorship

and restrictions on independent reporting, such archives provide insight into how students documented repression, interpreted political events, and circulated information across university networks.

Third, the analysis draws on seven anonymized student testimonies obtained through university movement networks. These accounts describe experiences of arrest, interrogation, surveillance, suspension, expulsion, and protest participation, as well as reflections on fear, uncertainty, solidarity, and political commitment. Rather than serving as representative cases, the testimonies illuminate how broader processes of repression, governance, and resistance were experienced and interpreted by students. A criterion-

based purposive sampling strategy was employed. Materials were selected when they contained first-hand accounts or documented evidence relating to surveillance, disciplinary intervention, detention, securitization practices, political participation, collective organizing, or forms of solidarity within university settings during 2025-2026. Particular attention was given to evidence concerning the institutional mechanisms through which security governance operated, including disciplinary procedures, information management, surveillance practices, and restrictions justified through security concerns. The objective was to identify information-rich cases that illuminate how students experienced, interpreted, and responded to the securitization of university life Table 1.

Data source	Number	Analytical purpose
Movement-related reports	2	To establish the broader political and institutional context
Publicly circulated Telegram posts	More than 30 reviewed; 13 selected	To examine public accounts of repression, solidarity, and student action
Anonymized student narratives	7	To examine lived experience, moral interpretation, and relational processes of political agency

Table 1: Data sources, selected materials, and their analytical purposes in the study.

Research Access, Positionality, and Ethics

Access to empirical materials was facilitated through the first author's longstanding engagement with Iranian student activists and university movement networks established during and after the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. These networks provided access to movement-generated documentation and student testimonies that are often inaccessible to external researchers operating under conditions of political repression. A substantial portion of the dataset originated from a student-run Telegram network documenting arrests, disciplinary sanctions, campus restrictions, and student mobilization across Iranian universities. Additional material consisted of unpublished testimonies that could not be publicly circulated because of continuing security risks faced by participants.

The author's embedded position provided valuable contextual knowledge and facilitated access to otherwise unavailable materials. At the same time, it required reflexive attention to potential biases arising from prior relationships and shared political understandings. These challenges were addressed through reflexive memo-writing, systematic comparison across sources, and triangulation between testimonies, activist documentation, and organizational reports.

Given the political sensitivity of the research, participant protection was a central ethical consideration. All identifying

information was removed from the dataset, including names, university affiliations, locations, and precise dates. Where contextual details were necessary for analytical interpretation, identifying information was generalized to reduce the risk of re-identification while preserving contextual meaning. Unpublished materials were used with permission, and particular care was taken to avoid disclosures that could increase risks for participants or their institutions. These procedures were guided by principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, minimization of harm, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis informed by the study's focus on authoritarian governance, securitization, political subject formation, and student agency. Analysis proceeded through an iterative process of coding, comparison, and conceptual refinement. Coding was conducted manually through repeated reading, memo-writing, and systematic engagement with the empirical material. Themes emerged through constant comparison across testimonies, organizational reports, and digital archives and were refined through ongoing dialogue with the theoretical framework.

Because part of the dataset consists of movement-generated documentation, findings were triangulated across student testimonies, organizational reports, and

independent human rights documentation. The objective was not to establish event frequencies but to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and processes associated with repression and political action. The analysis followed an abductive logic in which theoretical concepts and empirical observations were developed iteratively in relation to one another. Initial open coding identified recurring [35] references to surveillance, detention, disciplinary control, emotional responses, solidarity practices, political meaning-making, and resistance. Attention was paid to institutional practices that blurred the boundary between educational administration and security governance. Codes relating to surveillance, disciplinary procedures, information management, security-related restrictions, and coordination between university authorities and state security actors were analyzed to assess whether and how universities functioned as organizational infrastructures of security governance rather than merely as targets of external intervention. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories through systematic comparison across data sources.

Specific focus has been on identifying empirical manifestations of the study's core theoretical concepts. Evidence relating to surveillance, disciplinary procedures, information gathering, coordination between university and security authorities, and the regulation of academic life was analyzed as indicators of universities functioning as security infrastructures. At the same time, the study examined narratives of fear, witnessing, care, solidarity, and moral responsibility to understand how relational moral shock and student political agency emerged under conditions of repression. This analytical strategy enabled the study to examine both the institutional dimensions of authoritarian governance and securitization and the subjective processes through which students interpreted and responded to these transformations.

This process generated five interconnected themes: (1) institutional betrayal and the securitization of university space; (2) the criminalization of student identity; (3) relational moral shock; (4) reclaiming political meaning and collective identity; and (5) constrained agency through solidarity, witnessing, refusal, and political perseverance. These themes were then interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, providing the empirical basis for conceptualizing Iranian universities as contested political spaces in which state power and student agency are continuously constituted through their interaction.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The findings are based on non-representative qualitative materials and cannot capture the experiences of all students or universities in Iran. In addition, portions of the dataset rely on activist-

generated documentation produced under conditions of censorship and political conflict. Nevertheless, triangulation across multiple sources strengthens the credibility of the analysis and enables the identification of recurring processes through which universities are transformed under conditions of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization.

Findings

Analysis of seven student narratives, alongside movement reports and digital activist documentation, identified five interconnected processes shaping Iranian universities after the 2025–2026 uprisings. The findings show that universities became increasingly securitized and subject to surveillance and political control, while remaining sites of student agency, collective identity, and oppositional meaning-making. Five themes emerged: (1) institutional betrayal and securitization; (2) criminalization of student identity; (3) relational moral shock; (4) reclamation of political meaning and collective identity; and (5) constrained agency through solidarity, witnessing, refusal, and political perseverance. Together, these themes illuminate the dynamic relationship between authoritarian governance and student political action in contemporary Iranian universities.

Universities as Security Infrastructures

The narratives reveal a significant transformation of university governance as educational administration became increasingly integrated with security institutions. Participants described university authorities, campus security offices, intelligence agencies, and judicial actors operating through interconnected practices of surveillance, monitoring, identification, and disciplinary intervention. Rather than functioning as distinct institutional domains, these actors appeared to form a coordinated apparatus through which political control was enacted, suggesting that universities increasingly functioned as security infrastructures embedded within broader mechanisms of authoritarian governance.

One of the clearest examples emerged in accounts of students detained inside the University of Tehran following campus protests. Restrictions on movement were initially justified as measures to protect students from arrest by security forces waiting outside the campus. As one student recalled:

"We asked why we were being detained here, and the person on duty replied that plainclothes security personnel were stationed outside the university, and we could only leave after they had left."

Yet another participant described how this promise of protection facilitated detention:

"They said this was for our safety, to stop the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC from arresting us outside the university. But when we were finally told we could leave, security forces were deployed at all the university's exits, and we were taken into custody immediately."

A third student recounted seeing individuals identify protesters to security personnel waiting outside the campus: "I glanced back over my shoulder and saw three men pointing at me, saying, 'That's him.'"

These accounts suggest that university security offices were experienced less as protective bodies than as components of a system linking campus administration to state security enforcement.

The reach of these interventions extended beyond campus. Students described home raids, confiscation of electronic devices, restrictions on movement, and denial of access to university facilities. During the arrest of S.K., for example, security personnel entered her family home despite her mother's protests:

"I will not let you take my daughter."

Administrative procedures similarly operated as mechanisms of security governance. Participants reported being required to surrender passwords, sign statements, write pledges, and comply with administrative demands while receiving little information about the legal basis of their detention. As one student stated before being taken away:

"If I don't come back in an hour, you'll know what that means." For many students, these experiences blurred the boundaries between educational administration, security enforcement, intelligence oversight, and judicial authority, producing a profound sense of institutional betrayal. Institutions expected to provide protection and educational support were increasingly perceived as implicated in surveillance, identification, detention, and information-sharing practices. Participants further indicated that these interventions were justified through national security concerns associated with the broader wartime context. Student activism was portrayed as occurring during a "sensitive period" and interpreted through discourses of instability, external threats, and national security. Consequently, surveillance, disciplinary sanctions, and restrictions on political activity were framed not as routine administrative measures but as necessary responses to exceptional security conditions. Wartime securitization thus operated not only through expanded coercion but through the normalization of security logics within everyday university governance. Taken together, the findings demonstrate how universities were transformed into security infrastructures in which educational administration, disciplinary procedures,

intelligence practices, and judicial mechanisms became increasingly intertwined. Rather than serving solely as sites of learning and academic governance, universities became organizational nodes through which surveillance, regulation, and political control were institutionalized and reproduced. Institutional betrayal emerged because of this growing incorporation of higher education into broader systems of security governance under conditions of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization.

Criminalization of Student Identity: From Students to Subjects of Security Control

A second recurring theme concerned the criminalization of student identity. Participants described how ordinary student status and participation in protest were increasingly reframed as indicators of political threat. Rather than operating solely through formal prosecution, criminalization unfolded through labeling, surveillance, interrogation, and threats directed at students' educational futures. These practices transformed political participation from a civic activity into a matter of security concern.

According to multiple testimonies, protest participants were routinely described as "rioters," "mercenaries," or "agents of foreign enemies." Such labels positioned students as threats to national security before their grievances could be considered. The same logic appeared in interrogation settings. One detainee recalled being asked:

"Why did you join the unrest outside the University of Tehran during such a sensitive period?"

The question presupposed the illegitimacy of protest and framed political participation through a security lens. References to a "sensitive period" and recurrent appeals to national security suggest that student activism was increasingly interpreted through wartime security discourses. Protest was not merely treated as rule-breaking behaviour but as a potential threat to national stability during a period of heightened conflict. Students also described surveillance practices that extended from campus monitoring into detention procedures. One participant explained:

"When we set off to leave, I noticed that someone who appeared to be a staff member from the university's security office was following us."

Following arrest, authorities reportedly confiscated phones, searched digital communications, photographed and fingerprinted detainees, and collected detailed personal and family information. As one participant stated:

"They confiscated my phone, demanded my passcode, and searched my recent online activity records as well as all the

content in my photo album.”

Surveillance extended beyond individual actions to encompass friendship networks and social relationships. Students were repeatedly questioned about how they learned about protests, who participated, and which individuals-maintained connections with one another. Ordinary social ties were thus recast as potentially suspicious political networks, rendering students increasingly visible and knowable to security authorities. Criminalization also operated through efforts to reshape students’ interpretations of political events. Several participants described pressure to rewrite confessions until they aligned with official narratives. One student recalled:

“The first thing he forced me to say was, ‘I admit that I was wrong.’”

When responses failed to meet expectations, statements were rejected and rewritten. These practices sought not only to obtain information but also to impose understandings of political participation. Threats directed at students’ academic futures further reinforced this process. One detainee overheard an officer warn:

“If you take part in any more of these gatherings, you will never be allowed to pursue a master’s degree for the rest of your life.”

Taken together, these findings indicate that criminalization extended well beyond legal punishment. Through labeling, surveillance, data collection, interrogation, and narrative control, students were transformed from members of an academic community into subjects of security governance. Criminalization therefore functioned not simply as a mechanism of repression but as a broader process through which student identities, relationships, and future opportunities were redefined within a framework of authoritarian security control.

Relational Moral Shock: Fear, Humiliation, and the Suffering of Others

Although students frequently experienced direct forms of repression, the emotional and political consequences described in the narratives often emerged through witnessing harm inflicted on others. Fear, uncertainty, and distress were shaped not only by personal vulnerability but also by concern for parents, classmates, fellow detainees, and members of the broader student community. Family suffering featured prominently across multiple accounts. Reflecting on the arrest of S.K., one participant recalled:

“Looking at her mother, my heart was broken. I saw all the suffering she endured with my own eyes.”

Another participant summarized the emotional aftermath of detention through a brief observation about a family

member:

“She was crying.”

Students also expressed deep concern for fellow detainees. One participant described a young woman repeatedly fearing that nobody would know what had happened to her:

“She kept muttering that no one knew where she was, and no one would ever find out what had happened to her.”

Here, the narrator’s distress emerged less from personal danger than from witnessing another person’s fear and isolation. Experiences of abandonment further intensified emotional responses. Beeta Saidi recounted being violently restrained in a public setting while bystanders watched without intervening:

“He saw everything that was happening clearly, and heard my screams for help, but neither he nor anyone else nearby took a single step to intervene.” Reflecting on the incident, she concluded:

“No one is willing to help us.”

Across these narratives, repression acquired significance through relationships of care, responsibility, and mutual recognition. Participants repeatedly contrasted the failures of universities, security institutions, and bystanders to provide protection with acts of solidarity within student communities. Efforts to support classmates, maintain contact during detention, document detainees, and preserve the memory of those imprisoned or killed reflected a shared sense of responsibility toward others. These experiences suggest that political consciousness was often generated not simply through direct victimization but through witnessing the suffering [36] of socially significant others and recognizing one’s connection to that suffering. Harm directed at classmates, friends, and family members frequently became interpreted as a threat to shared relationships, communities, and collective futures. In this sense, relational moral shock emerged as a mechanism through which repression was transformed into solidarity, collective identification, and sustained political commitment.

Reclaiming Political Meaning and Collective Identity

Beyond generating fear and uncertainty, repression also became an object of political interpretation. Students did not passively accept official narratives that portrayed protest as disorder, foreign manipulation, or threats to national security. Instead, participants actively reinterpreted their experiences through alternative frameworks grounded in citizenship, justice, rights, and collective responsibility. Through these processes, repression became a site of meaning-making through which students challenged official accounts and redefined the significance of political participation.

One participant reflected on the unequal treatment afforded to protesters and pro-government groups before asking:

"Could the regime itself be the force that truly harms the country's national interests?"

The same participant continued:

"When citizens no longer accept the existing order, do they not have the right to protest and even seek political change?" These reflections rejected state narratives that framed dissent as a threat to national stability and instead positioned protest as a legitimate expression of citizenship and political agency. Struggles over meaning also emerged during interrogations. Several students described pressure to begin confessions with the phrase, "I admit I was wrong." Yet participants consistently distinguished between statements extracted under coercion and their own understandings of events. Even when compelled to comply administratively, they resisted efforts to redefine political participation as personal wrongdoing. These interpretive processes contributed to the formation of collective identities. Students frequently moved beyond their individual experiences to emphasize obligations toward others affected by repression. One account concluded:

"We must stand with S.K. and ensure her voice is heard by everyone."

Likewise, testimonies were circulated not only to document personal experiences but also to challenge silence and sustain a shared understanding of injustice. Collective identity was further reinforced through practices of remembrance. Narratives commemorating students who had been killed preserved both their names and their aspirations. One account described R.A. as:

"a cheerful, vibrant and hopeful young woman who spent her whole life longing for freedom."

Through remembrance, individual experiences of repression were incorporated into broader collective narratives of justice, freedom, and political responsibility. Reclaiming political meaning therefore involved more than rejecting official interpretations; it also enabled students to construct shared identities that connected personal experiences of repression to wider struggles over legitimacy, belonging, and political change.

Constrained Agency: Solidarity, Witnessing, and Political Perseverance

While the previous theme examined how students interpreted repression and constructed collective identities, this theme focuses on how those understandings were translated into practice. Despite extensive surveillance, arrests, and disciplinary sanctions, students continued to

exercise agency through forms of action adapted to highly restrictive conditions. Rather than relying primarily on public protest, agency was expressed through solidarity, witnessing, documentation, care, refusal, and remembrance. Students often acted to support and protect one another despite significant personal risk. Some challenged arrests directly or refused opportunities for individual release when fellow students remained detained. As one participant stated:

"We all leave together, or I won't leave either."

Others attempted to prevent arrests or remained alongside vulnerable peers during moments of uncertainty and intimidation. Such actions reflected a commitment to collective responsibility that persisted despite the costs associated with resistance. Solidarity also operated through everyday practices of care. One participant recalled:

"The whole way, the other student and I held each other's hands tightly."

Although seemingly modest, these gestures assumed particular significance within environments designed to isolate, intimidate, and fragment social ties. Acts of care functioned as expressions of collective support that countered the individualizing effects of repression. Agency further emerged through practices of witnessing and documentation. Students collected information about detainees, tracked the whereabouts of missing peers, and circulated testimonies that challenged official narratives. One participant explained:

"I wrote down all their names, in case something bad happened to them."

These practices preserved information that might otherwise disappear within systems of coercion and uncertainty. Witnessing therefore served not only as a means of recording abuses but also as a way of asserting alternative forms of narrative authority and sustaining collective memory. Remembrance extended these practices into longer-term forms of political perseverance. Narratives commemorating students who had been killed connected personal loss to broader understandings of justice, responsibility, and collective futures. One widely cited slogan encapsulated this orientation:

"For every person killed, thousands will rise up in their place."

Rather than allowing repression to erase individuals from public memory, commemorative practices transformed loss into a continuing source of collective identification and political commitment. The findings therefore suggest that repression reshaped rather than eliminated agency. Student agency was expressed through both adversarial and relational practices, including refusing cooperation with authorities,

supporting peers, documenting abuses, preserving memory, and sustaining networks of solidarity. These activities did not occur outside structures of repression but emerged within them, enabling students to maintain collective identities and political commitments under conditions of surveillance, coercion, and uncertainty.

Cross-Cutting Variations in Student Responses

Although the five themes appeared across the dataset, participants did not experience repression or respond to it in identical ways. Variations reflected differences in personal circumstances, forms of exposure to repression, and available social resources. Some narratives emphasized confrontation with authorities, while others focused on care, witnessing, uncertainty, or remembrance. Fear, resistance, helplessness, solidarity, and political commitment appeared in different combinations across cases. These differences suggest that authoritarian repression does not generate a uniform trajectory of political response. Emotional distress did not automatically produce stronger activism, nor did experiences of fear necessarily result in withdrawal. Instead, students navigated repression through diverse and often overlapping forms of action, care, endurance, and meaning making. Likewise, relational moral shock did not lead to a single outcome, but informed multiple forms of political engagement shaped by individual experiences and social relationships. This observation reinforces the argument that student agency under authoritarian conditions is heterogeneous, relational, and contingent rather than predictable or linear.

Integrative Summary

Taken together, the findings reveal a dual process shaping contemporary Iranian universities. On the one hand, universities became increasingly incorporated into systems of authoritarian governance through surveillance, criminalization, and wartime securitization, functioning as infrastructures of security governance. On the other hand, students continued to exercise agency through solidarity, witnessing, collective memory, and alternative forms of political meaning-making. These practices were often sustained through processes of relational moral shock, as experiences of shared vulnerability and concern for others reinforced collective commitments under conditions of repression. Repression and agency therefore emerged not as separate or sequential conditions but as mutually constitutive processes. State efforts to regulate, monitor, and depoliticize university life continually generated new forms of adaptation, solidarity, and political engagement. Iranian universities consequently functioned as contested political spaces in which authoritarian governance and student agency

were continuously co-produced through their interaction.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate how the convergence of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization transformed Iranian universities following the 2025-2026 uprisings. Rather than functioning solely as educational institutions, universities became increasingly embedded within broader systems of security governance. Surveillance, disciplinary sanctions, arrests, digital monitoring, and intelligence interventions operated through interconnected mechanisms that regulated campus life and redefined the institutional role of the university. At the same time, students continued to generate political agency through solidarity, witnessing, remembrance, and collective meaning-making. Understanding these developments requires moving beyond binary distinctions between repression and resistance and examining how they are co-produced through ongoing interaction.

The first contribution of this article is the development of the concept of **universities as security infrastructures**. Existing scholarship typically conceptualizes universities as targets of repression or objects of securitization. The findings suggest a broader process in which universities themselves become organizational mechanisms through which security governance is enacted. Educational administrators, campus security offices, intelligence agencies, and judicial actors operated through interconnected practices of monitoring, classification, information gathering, and disciplinary intervention. Universities therefore functioned not merely as sites subject to security policies but as institutional infrastructures through which those policies were implemented and reproduced.

This finding extends Bigo's (2002) conception of securitization by demonstrating how security logics become embedded within everyday university governance. It also speaks to analysis of the normalization of exceptional rule. Practices ordinarily associated with student administration increasingly acquired security functions, blurring the boundary between educational governance and political control. Wartime securitization therefore operated not only through the intensification of coercive measures but through the incorporation of security imperatives into routine institutional practices. The result was a transformation of the university from a site primarily concerned with education into a strategic node within broader architectures of surveillance and political regulation.

The findings further reveal that securitization was accompanied by the criminalization of student identity. Through surveillance, interrogation, documentation, and

disciplinary procedures, political participation was reframed as a matter of national security and students were constituted as objects of scrutiny and intervention. Consistent with Foucauldian understandings of power [37-38], these practices sought not merely to regulate conduct but to shape political subjectivities. Yet the findings also demonstrate the limits of such efforts. Students rejected official representations of themselves as threats and articulated alternative understandings grounded in citizenship, justice, and collective responsibility. Criminalization therefore produced ongoing struggles over legitimacy, belonging, and political meaning rather than political compliance. As Scott (1990) argues, projects of domination frequently generate counter-processes of reinterpretation and resistance.

Taken together, these findings suggest that securitization and criminalization functioned not only as mechanisms of control but also as conditions of political subject formation. As students encountered surveillance, exclusion, and the suffering of others, they developed alternative understandings of responsibility, justice, and collective belonging. Repression therefore operated simultaneously as a constraint and as a context within which new forms of political consciousness emerged. The second contribution of this article is the development of the concept of relational moral shock. Whereas existing formulations of moral shock emphasize individuals' encounters with injustice Jasper, the findings reveal a distinct mechanism operating under authoritarian conditions. Political consciousness frequently emerged through witnessing harm inflicted on socially significant others, including classmates, family members, and fellow detainees. Emotional and political transformation was therefore rooted not solely in personal victimization but in relationships of care, responsibility, and shared vulnerability. Relational moral shock shifts analytical attention from individual grievance to the relational processes through which political commitments are generated and sustained under repression.

Importantly, these relational processes contributed not only to political consciousness but also to political practice. Students documented arrests, tracked detained peers, circulated testimonies, supported affected families, and preserved collective memories of violence and exclusion. These activities strengthened solidarities and sustained oppositional communities despite extensive surveillance and coercion. Authoritarian repression thus generated not only fear but also forms of obligation, care, and collective commitment that enabled political agency to persist under highly restrictive conditions.

Taken together, the findings support the article's central argument that universities are best understood as contested political spaces. Rather than existing as [39-40] either

institutions of state control or sites of resistance, universities are arenas in which authoritarian governance and student agency continuously shape one another. Efforts to surveil, criminalize, and securitize university life reconfigured the conditions of political action without eliminating it, while students responded through solidarity, witnessing, remembrance, and political perseverance. Political agency therefore emerged within structures of repression rather than outside them.

The Iranian case demonstrates how higher education can become a central arena through which authoritarian regimes pursue security governance and through which political communities continue to contest it. Conceptualizing universities as security infrastructures, and political commitment as shaped through relational moral shock, provides a framework for understanding how repression and agency are mutually constituted in authoritarian contexts. More broadly, the analysis highlights the continuing significance of universities as sites where legitimacy, citizenship, justice, and collective futures remain subjects of political struggle even under conditions of wartime securitization.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Iranian universities were transformed during the 2025-2026 protest cycle through the convergence of authoritarian repression and wartime securitization. Drawing on student testimonies, movement documentation, and digital activist archives, it has shown that universities became increasingly embedded within systems of security governance while remaining sites of political agency and contestation. The findings suggest that repression and resistance are not discrete phenomena but relational processes that continuously constitute one another within everyday university life. The article makes two principal theoretical contributions. First, it develops the concept of universities as security infrastructures to explain how higher education institutions become organizational sites through which surveillance, disciplinary control, intelligence gathering, and political regulation are enacted. Rather than functioning merely as targets of repression, universities emerged as institutional nodes within broader architectures of security governance. This conceptualization extends securitization scholarship by demonstrating how security logics become embedded in routine administrative practices and educational governance.

Second, the article introduces relational moral shock to explain how political commitments emerge and endure under authoritarian conditions. The findings show that political consciousness was often shaped less by direct victimization than by witnessing harm inflicted on classmates, friends,

family members, and broader communities of concern. Experiences of shared vulnerability fostered obligations of care, solidarity, remembrance, and responsibility that sustained political engagement despite pervasive repression. By foregrounding the relational foundations of political subject formation, the concept broadens existing understandings of moral shock beyond individual encounters with injustice.

Together, these contributions support a reconceptualization of universities as contested political spaces where authoritarian governance and student agency are continuously co-produced. Iranian universities were neither instruments of state domination nor autonomous spaces of resistance. Rather, they functioned as arenas of ongoing struggle over legitimacy, citizenship, knowledge, memory, and political belonging. Efforts to securitize and depoliticize academic life reshaped, but did not extinguish, the conditions of political action, generating new forms of solidarity, meaning-making, and collective engagement.

Beyond the Iranian case, the findings contribute to broader debates on higher education under contemporary authoritarianism. As security discourses increasingly justify intervention in academic institutions, universities may become critical sites where projects of political control are institutionalized and contested. The Iranian case demonstrates that even when universities are incorporated into infrastructures of surveillance and regulation, they remain spaces in which alternative political meanings, solidarities, and futures can be sustained. Their enduring significance lies in this dual character: they are simultaneously objects of authoritarian governance and sites where its limits are continually negotiated and challenged [41].

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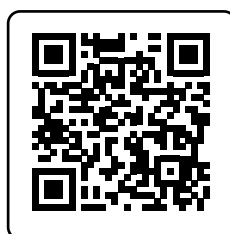
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