

# Education and Conflict Review

Rebuilding Syrian higher education  
for a stable future



Editor **Tejendra Pherali**

Guest editor **Juliet Millican**

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Centre for Education and International Development  
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Cover image: College of Arts, Raqqa, Syria © Hassan Almohammed

Image page 8: Main entrance of the College of Pharmacy, Raqqa, Syria © Hassan Almohammed

Image page 37: College of Science, Raqqa, Syria © Hassan Almohammed

Images page 52: Free Aleppo University in the Liberated Areas, Northern Syria

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Editor **Tejendra Pherali**

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## About Education and Conflict Review

*Education and Conflict Review* is an open-source journal published by the Centre for Education and International Development, University College London. It focuses on debates about broad issues relating to education, conflict and international development and aims to provide succinct analyses of social, political, economic and security dimensions in conflict-affected and humanitarian situations. It provides a forum for knowledge exchange to build synergies between academics, practitioners and graduate students who are researching and working in these environments.



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# cara

**a lifeline to academics at risk**

The publication of this special issue was supported by Cara (the Council for At-Risk Academics). Cara was set up in 1933 by academics and scientists in the UK. Cara's Syria Programme, remains the only international programme to focus on supporting Syrian academics who have sought refuge in countries neighbouring Syria, facilitating professional connection and continued academic development and contribution.

# Message from the Editors



Dr Tejedra Pherali



Dr Juliet Millican

Violent conflicts disrupt academic environments, often causing adverse impact on the nation's educated community who may be repressed, maimed, killed or exiled. As universities are critical spaces for personal development, professional formation and research and innovation, they play a central role in the knowledge society. It is vital to protect and provide academic opportunities to scholars who have been displaced due to fear of persecution so that their knowledge and professional expertise might be utilised in post-war rebuilding.

Generally, universities are seen to have three key 'pillars': teaching, research and service (Knight, 2004). The service notion is key in terms of how universities can contribute to post-war recovery and reconstruction, which may be examined within the framework of 'developmental' universities (McCowan, 2018). In conflict-affected contexts, universities cannot wait for the war to end in order to play their part in societal development and can be crucial to the survival, thriving and educating of citizens during periods of disruptions caused by violence. To be able to effectively perform this role, they need to navigate the constraints around political repression, loss or expulsion of their academic community, security challenges and destruction of their physical infrastructure or long-established academic practices and systems. In doing so, they stand a better chance of preserving what has survived the war and addressing challenges caused by societal divisions. In this process, protection of academics and their continued involvement in teaching, research and community support is crucial. More importantly, in promoting the role of universities in conflict mitigation and reconstruction, Syrian universities could potentially adopt what McCowan (2018: 193) identifies as 'the developmental model' with four key features of such type of university: a) a higher education institution whose primary goal is to serve its surrounding communities and the society at large; b) it serves the community in 'an egalitarian way' so that the most marginalised populations of the society are able to benefit from its offers; c) it focuses on 'non-academic benefit' that the goal is to support economic, social and political engagement of the populations; and d) the 'application of knowledge' is at the core of this process through which theoretical knowledge is translated into serving 'practical and immediate' needs of the communities. This is perhaps what differentiates a service-oriented university that is geared towards rebuilding society from a conventional higher education institution.

Syrian higher education has been severely impacted by complex violent conflict since 2011. The vast majority of higher education institutions in non-regime-controlled areas have been further impacted by an almost complete lack of any national or external support and many also having been displaced and forced to relocate on more than one occasion. A large number of academics have been either exiled or killed; any research that existed has almost disappeared and teaching has been disrupted by absenteeism, lack of resources and limited numbers of experienced faculty members.

This special issue of *Education and Conflict Review* (ECR) looks at the impact of the conflict on the universities in Syria; argues for the importance of supporting them; and evidences some of the contributions its academics are able to make despite the ongoing violent conflict. Featuring mainly the works by Syrian academics in exile, several articles share the results of research studies supported by Cara (Council for at-Risk Academics). As an international organisation that has served academics who have been persecuted by authoritarian regimes or forcibly displaced into exile to avoid risks to them and their families since 1933, Cara's Syria programme is a core part of its current work. ECR's partnership with Cara stems from our ethical and moral obligation to extend solidarity and support fellow academics who have been exiled due to violent conflict or fear of political persecution by the Syrian regime. It is an attempt to provide an academic space where Syrian colleagues are able to disseminate their work and continue engaging in academic activities. This issue of ECR also exemplifies the importance of academic collaboration between colleagues who are based in Northern universities and have supported the Cara programme, some writing jointly with Syrian colleagues; peer reviewing the papers; and others reflecting on learning from these collaborations. Many of the eleven articles included in this volume

cover work from research sites within Syria that would be almost impossible to reach without strong internal support networks. All the papers have higher education as the major theme, but some also explore other domains of Syrian society that are linked with higher education teaching and research and the possibility of a post-war future.

Abedtalas *et al.* explore the role of universities in fostering social capital as a means to building a sustainable peace in Syria. Belugi and Parkinson discuss shared strategic insights based on higher education experiences of academics from (working in) Belarus, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Serbia and South Africa. Their paper reflects on possibilities for mutual support from academics who have faced similar circumstances in different contexts, identifying a number of common dominant themes. Khuder and Petrić look at issues of co-authorship and collaborative writing practice in facilitating the academic literacies development of scholars in exile who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). Fincham reports on the role of higher education in helping Syrian refugees cope with the challenges faced in displacement, the opportunities on offer, particularly in the MENA region, and their political, social and economic implications for young people's lives.

Millican draws on conversations with Syrian academics in exile to explore the ways universities in non-regime areas might be supported, highlights how they reflect those of many universities in states that are fragmented or divided and notes the importance of capacity building and peer support. Hanley's paper presents a comparative analysis Cara's current Syria Programme and their earlier work in Iraq in 2011. She argues for the importance of a committed, high quality and engaged group of academics, the production of new locally relevant research and the creation of national and international networks to support recovery of the higher education sector. Shaban draws on a study

of three universities in Northern Syria during 2019 to highlight the situation of the higher education sector outside the control of the Assad regime, identifying their urgent need for reconstruction of infrastructure and support for academic and administrative staff and students.

Abdullah *et al.* examine the possibilities for incorporating Syrian heritage into the university curriculum in order to foreground Syria's diversity and as a means to promote peace. Abdullateef *et al.* look at the impact of the conflict on food security, including the loss of agricultural extension and university led research and new mechanisms for sharing knowledge that have evolved during displacement.

Omar *et al.* provide a unique analysis of the current situation of access to electricity in Northwestern Syria, showing how electricity generation has become nearly entirely dependent on the private sector with huge increases in expenditure and limited availability. The paper illustrates how university supported research could make a vital contribution to identifying and designing alternative energy supplies.

Finally, Pherali reviews some theoretical ideas about how refugees are positioned within social, psychological and humanitarian debates with reference to the struggles of Syrian scholars in exile. The article provides a stark account of one Syrian academic's experiences of displacement and life in exile, arguing that social and political constructs of 'refugeeness' that depict academics as victims need to be transformed into narratives of acceptance, highlighting the mutual benefits they bring for the coproduction of knowledge and increased academic diversity.

We hope that this special issue will not only serve as an important resource for those interested in researching higher education in Syria but also researchers and practitioners who support education in conflict-affected contexts around the world.

Finally, we are grateful to all the contributors; and reviewers of the papers who anonymously provided invaluable feedback on the earlier drafts. We continue to preserve ECR's status as a non-commercial open-source journal that is available to everyone, especially to those readers who cannot afford exorbitant fees to access scholarship behind the paywall.

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# Syrian higher education and social capital in times of conflict



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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of higher education (HE) in fostering social capital as a means of building a sustainable peace in Syria. We draw on a qualitative study in Northeast Syria to argue that the HE sector is currently playing a negative to weak role in developing social capital as it is highly politicised and suffers from outdated curricula and unsuitable teaching approaches.

## Key Words

Higher education  
Syrian crisis  
Social capital  
Conflict and peace

## Introduction

The focus of this study is to understand the extent to which universities in Syria (particularly Northeast Syria), might contribute to the development of social capital within the country. It explores the role of campus practices and activities in developing civic participation, social trust and shared values where these dimensions have been significantly eroded due to an extended period of conflict. As Ismail *et al.* (2017: 6) have shown, ‘the composite social capital index (SCI) in Syria declined by about 30 percent during the crisis’ and ‘the community trust component contributed to the overall decline of SCI by 58 percent whereas the contributions of the values component and the networks component were at the rates of 22 percent and 20 percent, respectively’. Due to contested political positions of conflicting groups and social divisions fuelled by the ongoing conflict, community trust has been lost in Syria.

It has been asserted that universities have a social mission and a role in developing the values and attitudes of young people. Pherali and Lewis (2019: 4) point out that ‘by promoting the messages about consequences of violence, addressing the social, political and economic inequalities and engaging constructively in identity politics, HE can support sustainable peacebuilding’. At the same time, however, one could ask how far such a mission might conflict with or compromise the university’s primary roles of academic teaching and research.

The war in Syria has been ongoing since 2011. The scale of the destruction has been physically and socially huge and the conflict has divided the

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society along ethnic, religious, tribal and regional lines. While peace agreements may eventually be made, evidence suggests that about half of countries emerging from conflict return to war within 10 years (Castillo, 2008). However, as Pherali and Lewis (2017: 13) suggest, HE ‘can act as a catalyst for peacebuilding by addressing the drivers of conflict’. It is likely that the post-war situation in Syria, when and if it is achieved, will be fragile and therefore it is crucial to invest in processes directed towards a sustainable peace that are rooted in bottom-up approaches which depend on the wider participation of diverse social, cultural and religious groups. Such participation requires the existence of minimum social capital, especially bridging social capital, in addition to bonding social capital (Putnam, 1993 cited in Millican, 2008). Social capital is defined as being ‘the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 21). It entails strengthening trust, common values and civic participation and plays an important part in building bridges of communication and trust between former adversaries and preventing a relapse into war (Cox, 2009).

There are a number of studies dealing with the relationship between HE and social capital, including teaching approaches, curriculum and extra-curricular activities (see Prentice, 2011; Melkumyan *et al.*, 2015; Ahrari *et al.*, 2016; Schweisfurth *et al.*, 2018). However, most of these studies were carried out in the context of stable or peaceful states. Few have examined the possibilities of developing HE in countries in or emerging from civil war to promote social capital in the context of positive peacebuilding, which Galtung (1969) differentiated from ‘negative peace’, as being the absence of structural violence and the presence of social justice and development. An approach to address this gap is presented by Pherali and Lewis (2019), who outline a global strategy for HE to contribute to peacebuilding.

Social capital, unlike physical or financial capital, is an intangible asset that can be strengthened through collective action, public participation, and civil and community perspectives on citizenship (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2001; Millican, 2008). HE can play an important role in enhancing social capital by increasing community trust, civic engagement, common values and community linkages (Putnam, 1993) through curricula, the culture of educational institutions, the integrity of students and faculty, and effective arbitration procedures (Woodroffe, 2011).

There is clear evidence that HE can increase societal trust, a willingness to accept differences, and achievement of intercultural familiarity and tolerance (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2015; Huang *et al.*, 2011; Nahas, 2010). HE can also play a role in enhancing civic engagement by involving students directly in community issues on the basis of reciprocity and mutual benefit. Service learning or community engagement programmes can provide the basis for building an active sense of citizenship, as well as developing leadership skills and networking abilities (Schweisfurth *et al.*, 2018). This can be true even in a post-conflict context, as evidenced by a study carried out at Džemal Bijedić University in Bosnia (Millican, 2008). At the same time, it should also be recognised that HE can play a negative role ‘either promoting messages of violence and division or those of peace’ (Milton and Barakat, 2016: 413).

## Methodology

This research was conducted in Al-Hasaka province, a region in the Northeast of Syria characterised by ethnic and religious diversity. The Syrian regime has continued to maintain control over some areas, especially in the Al-Hasaka city centre and the airport, while the Free Syrian Army controlled most areas of the province during 2012–2013. Armed Islamist groups, such as, the Al-Nusra Front, and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, sometimes called Daesh or IS/ISIS) have emerged to control large peripheral areas of the city. The area later came under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)<sup>1</sup>, with the support of the US-led international coalition against ISIL.

<sup>1</sup>SDF is an alliance of Kurdish People’s Protection Units with Arab, Assyrian and other militias.

University	Academic Staff	Administrative Staff	Students
Public	7	1	5
Private	2		
Unaccredited	2		

**Table 1: Sample of Interviewees**

There are three types of higher education institutions in Al-Hasaka province: public accredited, private accredited and unaccredited. At the time of writing, this area had not seen active fighting for more than five years, and thus provides an example of an early stage of what post-conflict Syria might look like. The research was conducted during the academic year 2018–2019 and the sample included academics (11), students (5) and administrative staff (1) from three types of universities (Table 1). The interviews were coded by assigning numbers to interviewees, their universities and occupation: academic (1), administrative staff (2) and student (3). Public university (1), private university (2), unaccredited university (3). The final number is the order of the interviewee. Thus 1-1-2 denotes academic staff member, number two from a public university.

A qualitative approach was used to gain the views of students, academics and university managers concerning how and whether HE might be used to help develop social capital in Syria and to reach a deeper understanding of them in their current context. Due to the security issues involved in conducting face-to-face interviews, individual interviews were undertaken via Skype or WhatsApp. A set of questions was compiled and piloted. In general, there was no familiarity with social capital terms that linked underlying themes together. The questions covered the relationships between HE curricula, teaching approaches and campus and social capital dimensions such as: promoting participation, empowering women, social trust, participating in decision-making and promoting shared values. These dimensions of social capital were extracted from Ismail *et al.* (2017) and were considered as guiding themes for this study.

The researchers were aware of the security concerns of participants and their fear about being interviewed. Thus, after receiving informed consent, each participant was assigned a numerical code indicating their university and position. Data was saved anonymously in a password protected Dropbox.

The study also faced challenges concerning the lack of clarity around the concepts used in the interviews and the technical difficulties of interviewing from a distance. Whilst participants chose the time and method of interview to avoid any security risks, the interviewers also needed to spend some time explaining the concept of social capital, providing examples, and otherwise engaging with the participants.

## Findings

Drawing on Ismail *et al.* (2017), responses were analysed according to five themes: participation in volunteering; the contribution of students to decision-making at the university; the participation of women in society; common values/conviviality and social trust.

### Participation in volunteering activities

The curriculum and the teaching process seem to have little or no role in encouraging such activities, even, as one academic claimed: ‘curricula and teaching methods discourage participation in such activities’ (1-1-6). Similarly, the activities on campus implemented by the student union usually had a weak role in motivating participation and were sometimes perceived negatively as being activities intended to mobilise students in supporting the political regime.

Most comments suggested that there was the potential, but currently universities play a weak role in promoting volunteering activities. This weakness was attributed to a number of factors such as, the lack of awareness about volunteering, as well as security-administrative obstacles that seriously impeded volunteerism in its true sense, including attempts for it to be co-opted for the political goals of the regime. In addition, the financial situation of university 'staff and students further inhibited volunteering, as students are forced to devote most of their free time working to generate income' (1-3-2).

There was almost unanimous agreement on the possibility of activating the role of the university in volunteering, and many suggestions on how to go about this, such as the introduction of courses dedicated to increasing public awareness of the importance of such activities, removing political interference, strengthening the role and independence of student organisations and developing teaching methods and curricula that encourage participation in volunteering activities.

### **The contribution of students in decision-making at the university**

The interviews revealed that curricula and teaching methods currently played no role in encouraging student participation in decision-making in any of the three types of universities. However, there was evidence of different forms of participation of students in the university councils, but all those interviewed pointed out the lack effectiveness in such roles. An academic pointed out that 'the presence of students in such councils is ineffective (1-1-5), resulting in students' 'distrust of their representatives in the student union and limiting the role of the latter to marginal issues such as, the preparation of exam programmes' (1-1-7).

The weakness here is attributed to several factors, such as the absence of participatory approach to decision-making at university level due to its appropriation by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ba'ath Party's national leadership, limiting the role of universities in this regard to simply receiving orders. Some indicate that there is participation of students in the Boards of Colleges and University Councils, but this is reported to be minimal and according to participants, 'a token gesture'.

### **Participation of women**

The participation of women in public affairs, including at universities, is an indicator of social capital. We found a diversity of opinions in the interviews conducted with sample members. Most participants referred to a high level of women's participation in HE. Some academics suggested that the university admissions system favoured women.

The nature of university activities and the nature of the university enrolment system provides equal opportunities for both genders. (1-1-3)

The University is interested in celebrating International Women's Day. (1-1-8)

The majority of those interviewed attributed the strong presence of women in the key realisms of Syrian society in terms of the high level of women's participation in education, especially in Al-Hasaka province.

The role of higher education is good in activating the participation of women due to the high level of women's education in the city of Al-Hasaka, which allowed them to play an acceptable social role. (2-1-2)

The ongoing war was also perceived to have had a positive impact on women's participation in HE with an 'increase in the number of female students, female staff and teachers due to migration and military operations, which consumed a large proportion of young men' (2-1-1).

### **Common values: Tolerance and conviviality**

The responses indicated a difference in the evaluation of how their university might promote values of tolerance and conviviality between different groups. These included the view that 'curricula and teaching ways support values of tolerance and conviviality', but these were attributed to individual initiatives of teachers (1-3-3). In addition, the nature of universities as a space for meeting and interaction between students from different backgrounds can also make a positive difference. The enrolment system of one of the universities does not distinguish between the ethnic and religious elements of Syrian society and so 'it managed to attract students from all religions and races' (1-1-3).

The positive role of the university in this respect could be due to 'the nature of the region which is characterised by diversity and a tribal and rural character' (1-1-2), and the presence of various social interest groups at universities and HE's continuity during wartime conditions; for example, 'when the attempt was made to close the university [Al-Furat University], all defended the continuation of the university' (1-2-1). However, the weakness and even negative aspect of this institution's role lies in the dominance of one-party politics on universities and the politicisation of campus activities.

Many also found the contribution of curricula and teaching methods to be weak or even negative, for example believing that the course on 'National Socialist Culture promotes suspicion and hatred among different groups' (1-1-6). There were many suggestions on how to enhance a university's role in this area such as, organising seminars and offering courses on the importance of common values; hosting external, influential figures in this field at the university events; and independence in designing the curricula and teaching methods to foster values of conviviality.

### Community trust

The vast majority of participants reported that the role of the university was weak in building community trust. It has already been shown that the curricula are outdated and not positively concerned with building community trust. Further comments included:

There is an absence of this culture [trust building] from the curriculum components. (2-1-2)

There were also references to the negative role of some elements of the curricula, such as the course on the National Socialist Culture:

The educational process is an incentive and does not go towards building values or trust... The relationships that arise between students are very weak. (2-1-1)

One of the negative factors in the current situation is the politicisation of the university, which is subject to the government's directions. An academic pointed out that:

The university plays a naive role in this field. It allows friendship between different groups, but it does not give security, and this is the result of the culture of society and the political power that governs and does not guarantee safety among members of society and the lack in delivering confidence between different groups. (1-1-6)

Another academic confirmed this opinion, referring to the 'the university being politically utilised for the regime' (1-1-3).

There is one striking factor that plays a positive role. The ethnic and religious diversity of Al-Hasaka and the presence of multiplicity of authorities which necessitate the building of certain forms of trust in order to maintain the provision of higher education. As one informant pointed out:

Political polarisation in Al-Hasaka requires the building of bridges of trust between different groups to ensure the continuity of the education process. (1-2-1)

### Conclusion

There was a general consciousness about the lack of public awareness about social capital, its dimensions and the role it could play in peacebuilding. In this context, indicators of a satisfactory or acceptable role for HE in developing social capital referred to the extent of the participation of women and the development of common values. The high participation of women was unsurprising given the high level of general social and educational development in the Syrian society prior to the crisis, in addition to the conditions of civil war, where males tend to be recruited into the armed forces and armed groups. This may have created more opportunities for women in all spheres, including HE, although this is not necessarily as a result of a concerted effort within the HE sector.

In addition, it was felt that common values were generally enhanced in HE, which could be due to the fact that universities attract students from diverse backgrounds and offer a space for interaction (although there is marginal political discrimination in enrolment by giving preference to those who are members of the Revolutionary Youth Union, an organisation for young people affiliated to the

governing Ba'ath Party in Syria). The role of curricula was found to be the weakest in enhancing these values, followed by teaching methods, while other campus activities tend to make some contributions towards building positive networks.

In relation to the other dimensions of social capital (such as participation in volunteering activities, common trust and the contribution of students in decision-making), HE played a very weak and negative role in enhancing them. The main cause of this weak and negative role is politicisation and political corruption which confines decisions to the political interests of the ruling regime and effectively reshapes the student union as an institution of the regime. This is similar to the finding that 'the Soviet political regime assumed that the notion of "public" in education was synonymous to that of the centralized state' (Melkumyan *et al.*, 2015: 224).

Indicators are that the role of the university in building social capital in unaccredited and private universities is stronger than in public universities. This may have been because of strong government control over public universities.

The diverse community of Al-Hasaka province supports the continuity of HE, which illustrates its potential in building trust and nurturing social capital among the university stakeholders. However, these abilities need to be further supported in ways that concentrate on mitigating political constraints that prevent the development of the sector as a whole. The experience of other similar contexts that have suffered from civil wars indicates the possible benefits of HE in developing social capital and enhancing sustainable peace as evidenced by Millican (2008) and Nahas (2010). This could be the case in Syria, but it would entail protecting HE from political interference and emphasising the importance of academic freedom. Academic staff would need to be retrained in new teaching approaches, such as service learning or student community engagement, that can contribute to developing social capital (Millican, 2008). The curriculum would need to be substantially reviewed, to remove courses and elements that are harmful to strengthening social capital (Nahas, 2010). Graduates could be encouraged to become culturally literate in Syrian society and its diversity, for example, by speaking at least three local languages, or passing a special examination relating to the Syrian culture.

HE can be both a means of exclusion and discrimination, as well as a way for (re)building social cohesion and sustainable peace. It is up to national authorities, Syrian academics, students and international partners to prioritise the latter.

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# Building solidarity through comparative lived experiences of post-conflict: Reflections on two days of dialogue

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## Abstract

Occasions for in-depth dialogue among academics in times of conflict are rare. Drawing upon such a dialogue between Syrian academics and international counterparts from contexts undergoing conflict or grappling with post-conflict legacies, we identify seven dominant themes that emerged from these discussions and reflect on participants' strategic insights and mutual support, in addition to highlighting the consciousness that was raised around the agency, limitations, complicity and intergenerational legacies borne by academics and the academy in crisis contexts.

## Key Words

Syrian academics  
 Conflict  
 Exile  
 Academic collaboration

## Introduction

The scale of destruction and displacement caused by the Syrian crisis has been unprecedented in recent decades, as have the challenges faced by Syrian academics working within conflict areas inside Syria and those displaced beyond Syria's borders. As academics, their authority, networks and skills to document and question unfolding events, as the informed voices of their communities and societies, place them at risk. Yet international investment in their protection, development and participation is noticeably absent, despite the acknowledged role of higher education (HE) in post-war recovery (Milton and Barakat, 2016). Academics are central to the social formation and knowledge-production of their societies, and experience the additional emotional labour of moral responsibility for often traumatised and fragmented families and communities. While such expectations and experiences are known to those on the ground, the international research community has arguably neglected its responsibility to bring their conflict-affected counterparts' experiences to light, and to support their growth, voice, and contributions to the knowledge produced about their countries and peoples. Knowledge and academia are areas not often explored in research on conflict and its legacies (Millican *et al.*, 2011), while the development and NGO community has largely focused their educational interventions on children and young people.

As an initiative to support the displaced Syrian academic community currently exiled in the Middle East region to sustain their academic work, networks and development, Cara (Council for At Risk Academics) established a dedicated Syria Programme in 2016. The curriculum of this programme has consciously deviated from

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mainstream academic development approaches rooted in understandings of 'best practice' within resource-rich global North HE sectors, and which are commonly aligned with institutional or national educational norms and quality assurance standards (see Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2019). Rather, the Syria Programme follows an action research design rooted in ongoing reflective and deliberative dialogue and community planning, supported by formal data collection activities. Data collection methods include large group processes, focus groups, one-to-one interviews and surveys used to elicit insights into the contextually-specific academic development needs of over 150 Syrian academics living in exile (predominantly in Turkey). These processes have informed a participant-driven academic development agenda (see Parkinson, 2018; Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2019).

Ongoing reflection and consideration of findings have revealed numerous interwoven challenges affecting exiled Syrian academics' ability to engage in academic work, including: isolation from disciplinary communities; lack of institutional affiliation, which in turn limits access to resources; deskilling due to inactivity; and cultural, linguistic and other communication barriers. To mitigate some of these challenges, participants have requested capacity building support in areas including teaching and learning, research design and methods, and English for Academic Purposes. However, more substratal and affective complexities associated with being an academic in exile have also emerged, including experiences of hostility from host populations (and host academic communities in particular); psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress; anxiety surrounding precarious legal status; and lack of trust among some groups of Syrian academics in exile, which in some instances relate to pre-existing ethnic, regional or sectarian tensions. Moreover, while specific cities in the host country of Turkey, such as Gaziantep, are home to large numbers of Syrian academics and thus serve as hubs for activity, many Syrian academics are dispersed throughout Turkey, and often face travel restrictions that limit opportunities for networking. Participants have spoken of feeling overwhelmed by these cumulative challenges, and ill-equipped to face them.

Garnering solidarity from the international academic community has consistently emerged as a priority for Syria Programme participants. However, while

the Programme has generated significant support from international academics, facilitating networking activities and brokering several ongoing partnerships, this has largely occurred between Syrian participants and UK-based academics who facilitate academic development activities or collaborate in research projects, thus inevitably entailing a North–South disparity in resources and experiences.

Syrian participants have asked specifically to be connected with counterparts from other countries that have experienced conflict and displacement. UK-based academics facilitating the Programme have, in turn, been struck by the extent to which the circumstances of Syrian colleagues differ from those working in resource-rich, peacetime, global North contexts, and have been concerned about their own capacity to facilitate meaningful academic development. Thus, a pressing need has emerged to seek input from academics with comparable, complex experiences, and/or whose work has involved reckoning with the legacies of conflict, oppression or displacement in other parts of the world. It was hoped, too, that international colleagues would themselves value an opportunity to share their experiences and reflect on these complex issues. As detailed in the methodology (below), a two-day event comprising roundtables and workshops was organised to bring together such contributors.

Crucial to these interactions was a shared commitment to honest dialogue and reflection, and a space in which disagreements and dissonance would be accommodated and worked through respectfully. Contributors were identified on the basis that their experience of being an academic, or knowledge of academia and the university in post-conflict, would enhance the range of perspectives and potential for comparative insights. The selection of contributors was inclusive of both experiential knowledge gained from lived experience, and knowledge generated through scholarship.

Informed by their own academic development and scholarship (see Belluigi, 2012, Parkinson *et al.*, 2018), the organisers were aware that to create a conducive environment required 'the right emotional tone under which authentic discourse can occur' (Brookfield, 1995: 27). Principles which informed the events were hospitality, to provide a sense of temporary shelter, protection and nurturing of those

present; safety, where an accepting and respectful climate (and assurances of confidentiality) would allow for unstructured, non-typical discussions by participants as they come to voice about complex and controversial issues; and a conviction that empathy, openness and self-reflection would engender solidarity between different participants, perspectives, memories and contexts.

## Methodology

### Roundtable and workshop event

At a two-day event held in Istanbul on the 21st and 22nd June 2019, 11 Syrian academics gathered together with 7 counterparts from (or working in) Belarus, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Serbia and South Africa, together with 3 UK academics participating in the Syria Programme, and 2 Cara representatives. The impetus and rationale for this event emerged from meta-analyses of data generated from interviews, focus group discussions and group processes with the participation of Syrian academics, conducted between 2017 and 2019 as part of the Cara Syria Programme. The event was conducted under the Chatham House Rule<sup>1</sup> to encourage free expression, with explicit assurances that comments made during the event would not be attributed to any one individual once the event was over. Simultaneous translation in English and Arabic was provided throughout, with translations transcribed anonymously. Full transcripts from the discussion over two days were subsequently analysed following a thematic analysis approach, enabling the identification of the dominant themes discussed below. Due to the risk posed to many of the participants we have taken additional care to obscure their identities and excluded verbatim quotations.

In order to promote exploratory discussion and to enable emerging themes to be pursued, the event was structured loosely. Formal engagements in roundtable discussions and breakaway workshops occurred during the day, which then continued informally over organised shared meals and social activities in the evening. The first morning was given

over to establishing shared aims and objectives, and context setting about the Syrian academic crisis. Following introductions by all contributors and general discussion around the issue of HE and conflict, participants were placed into smaller working groups to allow for more in-depth discussions around issues that emerged in the round. At the end of the morning, rapporteurs offered topical summaries of each group's discussions, which were subsequently synthesised into a list of common themes and issues to take forward for discussions about possible solutions in the afternoon. The second day comprised a combination of breakout sessions dedicated to particular themes which had been identified as salient from the previous day, with broader discussion in the round towards the end.

While working towards consensus is a common aim of workshops and similar gatherings, here, it was accepted that contributors differed in their expectations and motivations for the event, and held varied and particular contextual understandings and experiences of the issues under discussion. Some maintained throughout that their knowledge and experiences were rooted in the unique contingencies of their particular context, and that generalisability was not necessarily possible, nor desirable. We emphasise therefore that while we offer our reflections on some dominant emerging themes, we cannot fully account for the range of contributors' perspectives within this short piece. More nuanced engagements with these themes are being drafted, co-authored by those participants who have identified they have the affordance to be named without risk.

### Under the conditions of conflict: Brokering and relational expertise

The challenge of maintaining academic community cohesion under conditions of conflict emerged as a shared concern. Contributors spoke of breakdowns in trust that could inflame existing tensions, engender new divisions, and lead to impasse in planning and decision-making. Because many pre-conflict institutional or sectoral structures had broken down, Syrian participants reported that efforts to organise or

<sup>1</sup>Developed to create the conditions for debate with an understanding of the protections of anonymity and non-attribution, this global standard communicates the understanding that interactions conducted under the rule allow for participants 'to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed' (Chatham House, 2020: np)

work collaboratively outside of those structures often became mired in inter-group suspicion and could quickly become (or be perceived to have become) politicised. Many participants identified the need for external (i.e. non-Syrian) brokers to facilitate dialogue and provided the example of the positive role Cara had played in creating opportunities for collaboration around common priorities.

Many of the Syrian contributors expressed high expectations for Cara's role in brokering dialogue among Syrian academics in exile, providing a collective organisational identity and affiliation (in the absence of institutional oversight), and representing Syrian academics internationally. Cara representatives expressed concern about the sustainability of such expectations however, drawing from lessons learnt in the case of Iraq where initial successes proved unsustainable once Cara stepped away from its mediating role. This discussion highlighted a need for greater capacity building in sustainable models of collaboration among academics in exile, in addition to support from international partners, to mitigate against risks of dependency.

A pressing concern related to access for, and invisibility of, women academics. The single female Syrian academic present noted that the majority of currently practising academics in the non-regime areas of Syria were women. While the group discussed about various levels of risk faced by academics who were displaced and living in exile, women academics, in particular, faced significantly higher probability of losing their status both during and after the conflict, due to gendered biases and expectations. Concerns arose about the barriers to access for women academics, both outside of Syria and within its borders, including those who were maintaining the teaching component of the sector and those who had suspended their academic careers to support those of their spouses. Their continuous development as academics and their wellbeing were identified as in need of research and attention, echoing the findings of a study on Syrian women educators in Lebanon (Adelman, 2019). It was also acknowledged that women academics were conspicuously underrepresented on the Cara Syria Programme. Ongoing consultation has suggested a number of possible reasons for this, including: cultural expectations that women prioritise domestic care responsibilities; women's reluctance

to travel to Syria Programme events alone; a desire among Syrian women academics to build capacity in teaching-focused, rather than research-focused, activities; and women academics not being made aware of the opportunities presented by the Syria Programme, due to Cara's reliance on word of mouth promotion within a society that is in large part gender-segregated. In response to this issue Cara has made provision for travel and accommodation at workshops for women academics' accompanying family members, made increased use of online spaces to facilitate networking, incorporated a greater provision of teaching-focused development opportunities, and actively created research opportunities in disciplinary areas where women academics are more represented, and in relation to issues experienced by Syrian women. These steps have resulted in an encouraging uplift in women's participation recently, though much work remains to be done.

In addition, the Syrian contributors called for protection and support in safeguarding Syria's intellectual heritage, and in educating young Syrians both inside the country and in exile. Many felt they were largely unheard, misunderstood or let down by the international community of scholars, and their fatigue from struggling to muster support was palpable.

An irony was that during the days of the roundtable, a global declaration of academic freedom and institutional autonomy was made at the Council of Europe (2019) by international bodies largely unresponsive to academics such as these, in whose experience, such concepts were largely mythological.

### **Calls for international involvement, networks and recognition**

Discussions around the theme of recognition encompassed challenges relating to the lack of formal accreditation of HE providers in non-regime areas, but also lack of recognition—in the softer sense of acknowledgement of the plight of Syrian academia, and the value and expertise of Syrian academics in exile—by the international academic community.

Syrian contributors returned again and again to their sense of moral responsibility for the HE of their people. They expressed frustration with the misrecognition of the HE sector in conflict under

international law, highlighting that academic populations in liberated areas suffered greater delegitimisation than those in regime-control areas. Their insights evoked concerns about how the moral authority of the right to access to HE, of Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is complicated by the limited recognition of refugees' right to HE (Gilchrist, 2018) and the lack of both protection and accreditation for those institutions, programmes of study and academics operating within areas which do not fall under the sovereignty of the nation-state as recognised by the United Nations, such as those within 'non-regime'/'liberated' areas of Syria.

A number of proposals were mooted to address their concerns about a lost generation and harm to the Syrian academic heritage. However, UK colleagues expressed caution about the labour, time and expense of seeking international accreditation for institutions and programmes, when bodies and institutions would be risk averse and unlikely to accredit provision without seeing evidence of sustainability and quality assurance. There were different opinions concerning whether formal recognition was a prerequisite for establishing new universities in liberated areas, or whether pursuing recognition was a distraction and a drain on resources.

Colleagues from Palestine and Belarus spoke of their own experiences in this regard. They described how starting small and establishing a sustainable modicum of academic activity had enabled institutions to grow as conditions and circumstances allowed. One contributor questioned whether formal recognition was even desirable, since seeking recognition implicitly acknowledged the authority and legitimacy of those conferring it – whether oppressive regimes within the country or opportunistic external parties with neoliberal, expansionist tendencies. An argument was made for drafting indigenous criteria for legitimacy, to uphold academic autonomy and to support authentic and culturally relevant, rather than (neo)colonial, academic activities. However, it was acknowledged that this required commitment to a common cause, leading to robust debate that placed the following question at the heart of the event:

### Is it possible or desirable to depoliticise higher education?

Divergent views emerged around the possibilities and desirability of HE, and academics themselves, being a political. Reflecting a strong conviction that HE could play a unique role in the resolution of and recovery from conflict (see Millican, 2018; Milton and Barakat, 2016), the majority of Syrian contributors asserted the importance of establishing an authoritative, non-partisan organisation to represent the HE interests of the country as a whole. This was in the hope of unifying all factions around seemingly neutral, laudable aims such as supporting a skilled workforce and ensuring pedagogic quality, and to regain some credibility of academic autonomy and stability in the face of over 8 years of loss in the academic sector.

Many international contributors, both from currently oppressed contexts such as, Belarus and Palestine and post-conflict contexts such as, Bosnia, Serbia and South Africa, perceived such an apolitical stance to be impossible. A number of contributors argued that avoiding a political stance in the midst of conflict could mute the academic voice of the oppressed, diminishing the likelihood of motivating the international community to respond. A schism emerged, largely between contributors from post-conflict contexts and those from Syria, the former asserting that HE was inherently and necessarily political, and the latter asserting that it was essential to organise and act collectively outside of political distinctions, to formulate a powerful and credible academic voice and to address the risk of another lost generation. These discussions converged with debates concerning what Bush and Saltarelli (2000) refer to as the 'two faces' of education in conflict – its capacity for inclusion, reconciliation and recovery, but also its complicity in oppression, division and cultural erasure. It is possible that owing to the urgency of the current crisis and threats to their own existence within the precarious political climates of Turkey and Syria, the conditions were not conducive for the Syrian academics to begin to conceive of agonistic possibilities, where conflict is recognised as a necessary, desirable feature of democratic politics (Mouffe, 2013).

## The complicity of academia/academics in conflict

Contributors from Bosnia, Serbia and South Africa offered poignant accounts of living in contexts where academics' complicity in, or silence about conflict and oppression were a continued concern. Bosnian and Serbian contributors shared at length stories about the distrust and suspicion caused by post-conflict academic climates where the past continues to haunt the present, possibly because complicity in atrocities and oppression during the period of conflict were not reckoned with and continue to be overlooked within existing networks. Citing calls made as recently as 2018 for a truth and reconciliation committee for South African academia (Pather, 2018), one academic spoke of the continued haunting of that country's academic climate due to a lack of belief in universities as just spaces, and contrasted that with the righteous cause that academics-in-exile harnessed to further freedom and democracy in that context. Offering a provocative perspective from academia within a sector that had evolved and adapted amidst decades of social and political turmoil (Zelkowitz, 2014), a Palestinian contributor argued that HE should promote critical thinking of an explicitly political nature and be unapologetic in its emancipatory agenda.

Over the course of these discussions, it became apparent that much remained unsaid, as different points in the history of conflict and in Syrian contributors' positionality, and political perspectives, were left outside of the room. Positive experiences of working with Cara, a self-declared neutral organisation (Cara, 2017), had influenced the Syrian academics who elsewhere had found political orientations (or various other markers of identification and difference) to have a divisive influence and impede progress.

## Pathological understanding of conflict can impede progress and reconciliation

Contributors offered insights into approaches to addressing conflict in their own contexts, and the ways in which such policies and discursive orientations operated on the ground. As much as the international contributors were concerned about the human cost of the continued conflict in Syria, a number sought to share lessons of peace

processes. The Northern Ireland case was cited for its suspension of conflict as stasis, and the ways in which much of the past was as yet unreckoned, with divisions remaining as a result. Similarly, the authoritarian stasis of Belarus was seen as problematic for a healthy democracy and academic freedom.

Participants from Bosnia and South Africa warned against uncomfortable histories being glossed over in education, and recounted instances of unresolved trauma arising intermittently from the minutiae of curricula. From South Africa and Palestine came a sense of the generative possibilities of conflict as ways to resist the oppressive reproductive machinery of the status quo, and achieve clarity of academic mission. It was suggested that approaching conflict as a pathology to be cured, rather than a symptom of deeper pathologies or even a costly but necessary cure, could defer rather than resolve problems.

## Resources exist, but are inaccessible

Syrian academics in exile often lack institutional affiliation or work at the margins of the HE sector on precarious contracts. All the Syrian contributors expressed their frustrations with having to conform to the expectations of the global HE sector that, de facto, bars or obstructs their academic participation. They cited examples which ranged from non-institutional email addresses being routinely rejected as suspicious; prohibitive expenses for submitting their research dissemination to publishing houses or when accessing journal articles; educational resources, professional membership registrations and academic social media platforms which require institutional affiliation for access and/or inclusion; through to limited access to funding and the necessary conditions to undertake research and education for their people.

A desire was expressed for authoritative online platforms or centres, to enable the Syrian academics to archive, market and assert themselves, with a number of technology-related solutions proposed and explored. An intended focus of the event was to identify accessible resources pertinent to operating in low-resource developing contexts. While it was clear that valuable resources exist, many are inaccessible due to paywalls and other access requirements. It was agreed that establishing a repository of useful

Open Access resources would be a valuable first step towards an accessible resource base, and that concerted lobbying of institutions and professional bodies might lead to opportunities for access and support.

### Being in exile: dialogue and representation

Contributors agreed that opportunities for dialogue away from the heat of crisis allowed for the meaning and value of academic work to be reconsidered and reimagined. A number of contributors recounted how encountering those from across a conflict divide in a third country could throw shared experience into relief; some spoke of being able to engage with other exiled academics from their regions at an individual level, and thereby acknowledge shared humanity above ethnic, political, regional or tribal distinctions.

Moreover, there was agreement concerning the duty of exiled academics to speak about and on behalf of oppressed compatriots, using their positions and affordances to highlight concerns to the international community. Reflecting on the post-conflict developments in their own countries, international contributors paid tribute to the intellectual leadership of academics who had exercised their political agency to mobilise against authoritarian regimes while in exile, and were later able to contribute to nation-building, development, and truth and reconciliation initiatives when peace was negotiated. The exile-as-witness emerged as both a generative position but also a burden of representation. Among others, Edward Said (2000) theorised the exile as one who exists in the overlapping territories between the 'old' empire, the current crisis, and the 'new' state, in a condition of tensions, irresolution, and contradiction. Such marginality and positioning within time thresholds holds the potential for an émigré consciousness to emerge among intellectuals, whose life experiences and sense of obligation 'for the hopeless' is generative when balanced with 'a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern (Adorno, 1951: 67-8, cited in Said, 1993: 404).

Contributors were not naïve about the politics of representation and political activism within academia. A number of the contributors from post-conflict contexts chose to describe at length the tensions between academics that still festered decades after the cessation of armed conflict. They noted

how tensions between often divisive identities, networks and allegiances characterised academics in post-conflict contexts, including those academics who had attained political reputation and professional capital while in exile; those who had remained in their country, who perceived themselves as having 'weathered the storm' of state assault within but had become deskilled; those who were seen to have colluded with oppressive regimes and/or participated in the state surveillance of academics, institutions and student activists; in addition to those who avoided political involvement and were accused of averting their gaze. Even the younger academics present, who had not themselves experienced academic life under conditions of exile or conflict, described residual toxic atmospheres characterised by suspicion, distrust and factionalism that persisted as a legacy of their older colleagues' experiences, and the hidden dynamics of post-conflict academia.

Although the intrinsic value of dialogue was acknowledged by all, there was a sense of scepticism among some of the Syrian participants about whether such dialogue could make any timely or material difference to those currently enduring conflict. They asserted that formal, action-oriented collaborations, particularly those leading to some form of international recognition, were urgently needed.

### Concluding reflections

The event discussed in this reflection was developed in response to the desire, expressed by Syrian academics within the Cara Syria Programme, to connect with international colleagues from whom they might learn about sustaining academic life during crisis. The role of dialogue during this process was intended as a tool to facilitate collaborative learning amongst academic colleagues and researchers, and to bridge the gaps which a formal curriculum could not address.

As the HE sector is caught in tidal waves of change globally, the event offered a moment of solidarity for those conscious of the limits and affordances of academic agency, responsibility and privilege during conflict, crisis and in its aftermath. Reservations notwithstanding, the dialogue resulted in unintended learning of reciprocal value. Beyond the pragmatic and theoretical aspects of the discussions, contributors' reflections on their lived experiences



placed the affective domain at centre stage. While some of the contributors were researchers of HE and of conflict, the shared understanding of the value of this domain allowed for the gravitas of responsibility, and of trauma, to be present within the discussions. Syrian contributors all reported that this short event had helped them to process their experiences and given them motivations and a strategic direction. This feeling was reciprocated by international contributors, some of whom had never spoken of their experiences to audiences outside of their own countries, if at all. All reported to have found the experience of sharing to be profoundly beneficial professionally, intellectually and emotionally, and to have been inspired in turn by the resilience and resourcefulness of Syrian academics in exile.

Clearly evident were the limitations of such a short-lived interaction. The possibilities of academics' influence within their institutions and the HE sector at large, seemed dwarfed by the distant magnitude of larger geopolitical processes

and actors at the macro-level. There was a tacit awareness that direct discussion of political activism by Syrian academics was too risky, despite careful protocols and secure location. Moreover, misgivings about the possibilities for the timely and material impact of research on post-conflict HE, and on critical academic development specifically, were expressed across the board. Despite these limitations, the event stimulated several ongoing collaborative initiatives.

## Author Bios

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# Academic socialisation through collaboration: Textual interventions in supporting exiled scholars' academic literacies development



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## Abstract

This paper explores how co-authorship, as a type of collaborative writing practice, facilitates the academic literacies development of scholars in exile who use English as an Additional Language (EAL). Drawing on examples from a larger study looking into Syrian exiled scholars' academic literacies development, we discuss Areas and Levels of Textual Intervention (AoTI and LoTI) in co-authorship practices.

## Key Words

Academic literacies  
Collaboration  
Textual intervention  
Syrian academics

## Introduction

Academic collaborations are useful ways of bringing together knowledge and expertise of researchers from different fields, methodological interests, and diverse experiences to develop new insights into a phenomenon. One form of collaboration is co-authorship, i.e. joint production of publications which, when involving researchers of different levels of experience, can be considered an academic socialisation tool where the more experienced researchers assist the less experienced ones in understanding the requirements and expectations of the academic community they wish to enter. This type of collaboration can be particularly invaluable as a way of helping exiled academics who wish to enter the international academic community but may not have had the experience of disseminating their research internationally. There are some promising examples of collaborative work between Syrian exiled academics and centre-based academics ('centre' here refers to the Anglophone, global North centre of knowledge production; for more information, see Lillis and Curry (2010) through support programmes such as the Syria Program (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018; Parkinson *et al.*, 2020). Parkinson *et al.* (2018) reported that the Syrian scholars valued the long-term benefits of such research collaborations in their academic careers. Thus, the exiled academics perceive collaboration, along with the co-authorship practices involved, as an academic socialisation process.

Socialisation into a 'publish or perish' academic culture entails developing one's academic literacies, and co-authorship can be seen as an essential approach to academic socialisation (Darvin and Norton, 2019). Of relevance here is research

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on the role of written feedback, i.e. written comments on a draft provided by a teacher or a peer, which has been recognised as a form of socialisation of less experienced writers (see Fujioaka, 2014; Seloni, 2012). Giving feedback to EAL (English as an Additional Language) writers, particularly EAL students, and its effect on writing development remain controversial areas that have received a considerable amount of attention in the field (Bitchener, Young and Cameron, 2005). Seror (2014) studied feedback as an academic socialisation experience of a Japanese university student, Yoshimi, studying Philosophy in Canada. Methods used in this study included biweekly semi-structured interviews with the participants during the eight months' period of the study, in addition to collecting documents relating to students' writing, such as their drafts, feedback they received and the assignment prompts. In investigating the effect of feedback on Yoshimi's socialisation process, Seror (2014) found that the way Yoshimi, among others, viewed himself as an EAL writer was impacted on by one of his professors' focus on grammar when giving him feedback. Darvin and Norton (2019) provide, through auto-ethnography, an account of how their mutual co-authorship resulted in socialising the less experienced writer, Darvin, to the academic community. However, missing in this account is a description of how the co-authors interacted and what exactly in their collaboration facilitated Darvin's socialisation. Gaining an understanding of the dynamics of collaboration on texts – whether in joint text production or in cases of the more experienced writer providing feedback to the less experienced writer – is key to understanding how collaboration facilitates academic literacies development. This knowledge can significantly contribute to developing more effective support to early career academics or those moving from one academic environment to another, as is the case of academics in exile. Thus, in this paper we look at co-authorship between a 'more' and a 'less' experienced academic, focusing specifically on the areas and levels of textual intervention in collaborative text production.

## Overview of the study

Our study looks into academic literacies development of Syrian academics in exile in

Turkey and the UK supported by Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics). We have used ethnography as a method, via talk-around-text interviews; ethnography as a methodology, via textual analysis of feedback comments, textual analysis of the Syrian academics' writing, writing logs, network logs, and interviews with both the Syrian academics and their co-authors; and ethnography as 'deep theorizing' (Lillis, 2008), via analysis of voice development. In this paper, we explore co-authorship drawing on examples from one case, Ahmad (pseudonym), a Syrian academic working in the field of life sciences and based in the UK, who had successfully published more than ten articles in international journals while in exile. Data sources include interviews with Ahmad and his co-author, Julia (pseudonym), a senior UK-based academic, as well as Ahmad's drafts and Julia's feedback on them.

In the following section, we discuss two aspects related to co-authors' feedback that emerged from the textual analysis of the co-author's textual intervention: Area of Textual Intervention and Level of Textual Intervention. We use the term 'textual intervention' rather than 'feedback' to highlight the broader scope of the co-author's responses, which range from providing directive comments on the author's draft, engaging in a disciplinary dialogue, to writing or rewriting parts of the draft. We use 'author' to refer to Ahmad, who is the author of the draft under discussion, and 'co-author' to refer to Julia, his co-author, who makes textual interventions.

## Area of Textual Intervention (AoTI)

By AoTI, we mean the area of writing co-authors comment on. This has been studied by researchers investigating feedback provided to student writers, as mentioned above. Research on EAL student writing instruction distinguishes between form and content areas of feedback (see Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994). In his study into student writing in subject areas of Business, Science, Engineering and Arts in Hong Kong University, Hyland (2013) found that faculty members focused on disciplinary areas in their feedback involving how to craft discipline-appropriate arguments that are understood by the academic community in their disciplines. Tutors reported being less concerned

about grammatical issues; instead, they were primarily concerned about 'teaching them to write logical essays which take a research question and address it in a structured and thoughtful way with evidence and logical conclusions' (Hyland, 2013: 244). In research on academics' writing practices, of particular relevance here is Lillis and Curry's (2006) study of literacy brokers, a term they use for individuals who help EAL scholars when writing in English. In their in-depth study of writing for publication practices of 30 multilingual Psychology academics in Hungary, Slovakia, Spain, and Portugal, they found that their participants' literacy brokers' foci of feedback ranged from sentence-level language issues to academic content-related issues. This range of areas of literacy brokering led them to distinguish between two types of brokers: 'academic professionals' who 'orient to knowledge content and claims, [and] discipline-specific discourse' and 'language professionals' who 'tend to focus on sentence level revisions and direct translations' (Lillis and Curry, 2006: 15-16).

While our study shares the focus on EAL scholars' publishing in English with what Lillis and Curry (2006, 2010) reported on, the literacy brokers in our study were also the co-authors of the drafts, which made their roles more complex, resulting also in a wider range of the areas they commented on. We identified the following broad Areas of Textual Intervention: disciplinary conventions, academic writing conventions, and publishing conventions. It should be noted here that all of the co-author's comments are quoted verbatim; however, information that could reveal the identity of the participants is edited out.

Textual interventions focusing on disciplinary conventions include a range of disciplinary aspects, such as:

**Disciplinary terminology:** Julia replaced the words 'cattle and sheep' in Ahmad's draft with the more disciplinary appropriate term 'ruminants' because 'that was the appropriate disciplinary word that should be used.' (Julia, Ahmad's co-author).

**Disciplinary argument:** Julia asked Ahmad to discuss the results of their study with reference to previous studies reaching both similar and different

results to theirs: 'It would be wise to compare and contrast the result with more than one report. Indicate reports that have both similar and different results from what you are presenting'. Here the co-author is asking the Syrian academic to enrich the discussion section, which lacked in discussion on different perspectives.

**Positioning the research:** Julia asked Ahmad to reconsider his theoretical positioning: 'Can you provide an evidence for this? It sounds like an argument by a feminist. The reality is not necessarily in line with the arguments of such groups.'

Textual interventions focusing on academic writing conventions include comments about the following issues:

**Missing information:** 'Where in the study did you measure water intake?'

**Organisation:** 'Move this part to the end of the previous section.'

**Coherence:** 'Be consistent between the two materials over use of Latin binomials.'

**Appropriacy and accuracy of expression:** (including issues related to grammar, typographical errors, repetitions): commenting with '!!!' on the space between two acronyms.

**Precision of information:** Julia's comments focused on enhancing accuracy of their account 'Are you sure this is accurate? Check again.'

Publishing conventions related feedback focused on the following:

**Reader awareness:** 'You might struggle to convince reviewers how this actually increases the pressure on mixed FS.'

**Journal-specific expectations:** 'Get a copy of the paper available at [name of journal] and follow the structure carefully. See how they structured the paper.'

We should mention here that those aspects of the three discussed areas are not exhaustive. In this paper we only provide examples emerging from our data.

### Level of Textual Intervention (LoTI)

We introduce here the concept of LoTI, defined as the extent to which the co-author intervened in the text. Figure 1 below shows five Levels of Textual Intervention illustrated with examples from our data, with LoTI1 being the highest level of textual intervention and LoTI5 being the lowest.

The Textual Intervention Levels differ in both the space for negotiation given to the author as well as the amount of textual engagement:

At LoTI5 there is minimal textual engagement; the co-author is either unable to understand the text or considers it unacceptable. This approach leaves an open space to the author to respond (e.g. by rewriting the section in the way he wishes or by asking for clarification) but because of its vagueness, the author may not understand the co-author’s intended message.

At LoTI4 the co-author asks a question which could be either a genuine one (i.e. the co-author needs more information to understand the issue) or could serve as an indirect request to the author to include the missing information in the paper.

LoTI3 is a teacher-like intervention, which includes an evaluative comment (‘good’) and instruction (‘explain...’). Feedback at this level provides clear suggestions for the author and leaves little space for negotiation to the author.

At LoTI2, the co-author decides to take the responsibility for writing a part of the text and informs the author accordingly.

At LoTI1, the co-author revises the text by themselves.

Both LoTI2 and LoTI1 involve the co-author writing or rewriting a part of the text, and Julia reported having several reasons for this type of intervention, one of which was to provide Ahmad with models of writing a particular part of the genre (e.g. discussion section) or about a particular disciplinary issue in an appropriate academic style. Additionally, the difference between LoTI1 and LoTI2 is that LoTI2 leaves more space for the author to try to rewrite the section themselves, whereas in LoTI2 the co-author’s intervention is more difficult for the author to contest although this option is still open to them. As we have seen in our larger study, as Ahmad’s confidence as an academic writer developed, he started making changes even to the feedback at LoTI1, i.e., rewriting the sections written by his co-author.

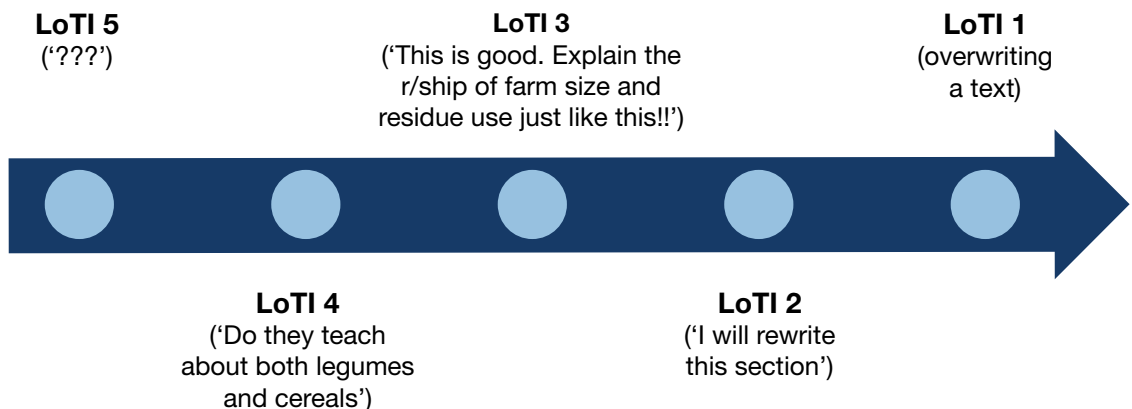


Figure 1. Level of Textual Intervention (LoTI)

## Implications: AoTI and LoTI as practical tools in co-authoring practices

Our research demonstrates that co-authorship, as a form of collaboration, is an important part of exiled scholars' academic socialisation into the international academic community. Therefore, it is important for co-authors working with exiled academics to consider writer development rather than merely improving the text. We suggest this can be achieved by focusing on the different areas of textual interventions as discussed above as well as by making textual intervention at different levels of engagement. The co-author could choose varied levels of textual intervention when focusing on the same area. For example, when commenting on missing information, the co-author could consider giving suggestions for improvement that provide a template which could be adapted in other papers for similar purposes (i.e. LoTI3). For example, one of Julia's comments provided such a template: 'xx comprise of xx, x etc.??? ... They are mainly used as feed for xxx? thrown away? etc. They can be preserved by x or x. This review evaluates the x.' Here the Syrian academic only needed to fill in the spaces. Another comment in the same draft focusing also on missing information intervened at LoTI5 where Julia wrote '???' next to a place in the text where she identified an incomplete account. Ahmad reported finding the mix of approaches rather helpful. We also observed that Ahmad learnt considerably from Julia's textual interventions and was able to transfer these skills to his new writing projects.

We believe the examples and insights provided in this paper could be of benefit to those supporting academic writing development of EAL exiled academics, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutors, by shedding light on how exiled academics could collaborate with more experienced centre-based academics on joint publications and, more specifically, on the types and levels of textual intervention experienced academics can make on their less experienced colleagues' draft work. This understanding, together with the examples above that may be incorporated in teaching materials, may result in more authentic EAP teaching.

Co-authorship is a practice that is normally hidden from view; it is also a practice guided by academics' tacit knowledge. Nevertheless, making this knowledge overt could also be helpful to centre-based

academics, which could raise their awareness of the kind of support that is needed and the different ways the exiled academics can be supported to facilitate their academic socialisation.

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# Higher education and Syrian refugees' navigation of economic, social and political constraints in exile



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## Abstract

Using primary and secondary data, this paper critically examines whether higher education (HE) is living up to its potential in terms of helping refugees to cope with the challenges they face within displacement settings. In particular, the paper explores the extent to which HE opportunities currently on offer for Syrian refugees in the MENA region are helping them to navigate the economic, social and political constraints they experience in exile.

## Key Words

Higher education  
Syria  
Refugees  
MENA

## Introduction

Currently, more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees are registered with UNHCR (the majority of whom are above the age of secondary education) (UNHCR, 2020). However, access to higher education (HE) is severely limited for refugees, and globally, only one percent attend university (Ferede, 2018). In response, international organisations have been working with local partners in the MENA region to try and meet the enormous demand for quality HE amongst refugees. While HE opportunities have increased in quantitative terms, these opportunities have not always expanded refugees' functionings (ability to be or do what they value) and capabilities (freedoms and opportunities to achieve the effectively possible), nor always enabled them to effectively navigate the constraints experienced in exile (Sen 1999). Where HE is available, it is not always accessible, nor is it always acceptable to refugees or adapted to their specific needs (Tomasevski, 2006; Fincham, 2020). From a capabilities perspective (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2003; Vaughn, 2007), HE opportunities available for refugees do not always increase their 'functionings', nor do they always enable an expansion of refugees' 'capabilities'.

Combining empirical qualitative research with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (with focus groups as the primary research method) (Fincham, 2020) with secondary research, this paper critically examines whether HE is living up to its potential in terms of helping refugees to cope with the challenges they face within displacement settings. The first section outlines the ways in which the Capability Approach can be a helpful framework for thinking about HE in relation to refugees.

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The subsequent sections explore the extent to which HE opportunities currently on offer for Syrian refugees in the MENA region are helping them to navigate the particular economic, social and political constraints they experience in exile.

## Capabilities approach

Moving beyond simplistic resource-based welfare approaches to education, the Capability Approach recognises that different people have different motivations for undertaking HE, as well as different educational needs within it.

The capability approach is based on the precepts that a) freedom to achieve wellbeing is of primary importance, and b) this freedom needs to be understood in terms of people's capabilities – their actual opportunities to be and do what they value. Its main premise is that education should provide people with the freedoms they need to achieve their desired functionings and capabilities (e.g. enable refugees to live lives that they value) (Sen, 1999). Functionings are realised and future achievements (e.g. being a graduate), whereas capabilities are the effectively possible (e.g. the opportunity for a refugee to complete HE) (Sen, 1999). Education itself can be a functioning or act as a conversion factor to enable other functionings (e.g. social mobility) (Vaughan, 2007).

The capability approach acknowledges the structural, social and cultural factors which may impede someone from converting a resource (e.g. HE) into a capability. Differences related to gender, class, ethnicity etc., enable or constrain individuals in their ability to convert resources into functionings and capability sets. For example, a female refugee's freedom to use her university degree to undertake employment will depend on her legal right to work in the host country, as well as a social and cultural context in which she can claim this right (Vaughan, 2007). In this way, the capability approach recognises that having equal access to resources is not the same as having equal opportunities to benefit from them.

The capability approach looks beyond collective outcomes for refugees and recognises individual difference and individual capabilities (Vaughan, 2007). As communities are not homogenous, and

individuals wish to live different kinds of lives, it cannot be assumed that, provided with the same opportunities, all people will wish to achieve the same functionings (Robeyns, 2003).

Similarly, the capability approach is sensitive to refugees' non-financial functionings and capabilities (e.g. being part of a community, being respected by others, etc.). For example, it recognises that gender equality and gender empowerment may mean different things for different groups in different contexts (DeJaeghere and Wiger, 2013). In some refugee contexts (e.g. Syria), women may voluntarily adhere to traditional cultural and/or religious codes (e.g. performing scripts of marriage and motherhood) to prioritise the enhanced social status they achieve through them (Dunne *et al.*, 2017). This has direct implications for female refugees' interest in and engagement with HE.

Despite its challenges, (discussed in detail in Vaughan (2007), the capability approach is helpful in thinking about HE's potential to expand an individual refugee's overall capability set.

The sections below use a Capabilities lens to examine the extent to which HE opportunities currently available for Syrian refugees in the MENA region are helping them to navigate the particular economic, social and political constraints they encounter in exile.

## Economic constraints

Within the Syrian context, refugees face many economic constraints, such as depletion of personal savings, financial insecurity, lack of access to formal labour markets, job quotas and employment restrictions in high-status and high-paying white collar professions (e.g. engineering, law and medicine) (Tiltne, Zhang and Pederson, 2019; Sheehy, 2014). Host governments have often been reluctant to offer work permits fearing that refugees will take jobs from locals, push down wages and be encouraged to settle permanently. As a result, many young Syrian refugees have been restricted to employment as undocumented workers in food service, construction and retail, at risk of workplace exploitation with no legal recourse in case of abuse by employers. (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014b; Knell, 2016).



Male refugees who are unsuccessful in securing employment in host countries often become vulnerable to human trafficking and recruitment into armed groups (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a), whereas female refugees become vulnerable to early marriage (Chatty, 2016).

### **Economic constraints and HE**

For refugees, HE is often strongly linked to employment outcomes (or the perception of these outcomes) (this is problematised in Brennan and Shah, 2003). Indeed, quality HE can provide individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve better livelihood prospects, higher earnings and economic mobility. It can also help them to achieve economic self-reliance and facilitate their integration into local economies (Sheehy, 2014). However, for Syrian refugees, HE itself can be a major source of financial strain.

As most refugees cannot afford the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of HE, they are heavily reliant on scholarships provided by (primarily Western) donors. However, the number of scholarships available for refugees is inadequate and does not meet demand (Abdulssattar Ibrahim and Nassar, 2019; Sheehy, 2014). Moreover, within the context of global hegemonic power relations, Syrian refugees, regardless of country of asylum, are directly impacted by (Western) neoliberal HE agendas (Dale, 2000; Rizvi and Lindgard, 2000) which conceptualise HE in relation to employment outcomes, often to the exclusion of refugees' other needs (e.g. the intrinsic and the social). This means that refugees perceived as less likely to be economically productive are often overlooked in terms of scholarship provision. For example, scholarships for refugees over the age of 30 (so-called 'overage learners') are scarce, as are scholarships for refugees with disabilities (Fincham, 2020).

Scholarships that are available for refugees are often limited to certain subject areas believed by donors and policymakers to be critical for post-conflict reconstruction (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014b; Fincham, 2020). Refugees who are interested in continuing their education often feel compelled to study subjects for which they may have little interest

or aptitude and/or are unrelated to their earlier academic studies. In line with donor 'efficiency' agendas focused on value for money (discussed in more detail, below), scholarships are largely limited to undergraduate study (understood to provide a greater return on investment), effectively excluding refugees from career paths which require postgraduate education, such as academic positions involving research and teaching in HE. In studies examining Syrian youths' perceptions of HE experiences (Buckner, 2013), young people questioned how useful their HE would be if it did not enable them to live lives and envision futures that they valued. In particular, refugees felt that scholarship providers were simply repeating mistakes made by the Syrian government, which had tracked students into particular economic fields (regardless of interest), while not providing them with guarantees of employment (Buckner, 2013; Fincham, 2020). These are examples of how refugees' functionings and capability sets have been limited by the scholarships made available to them within displacement settings.

In exile, refugees are similarly limited by the types of HE on offer, which are often conceptualised with reference to the overarching objectives of 'effectiveness' (educate refugees to achieve specific goals – i.e. improve employment outcomes, produce a skilled workforce, drive post-conflict reconstruction) and 'efficiency' (educate the largest number of refugees at minimal cost).

In order to achieve 'effectiveness', education strategies for refugees have largely focused on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and employment-based non-formal education. This focus acknowledges the significant financial constraints encountered in exile but ignores refugees' other desired functionings, resulting in limited capability sets (discussed in more detail below). Many refugees have questioned why they are being tracked into technical education when they are not legally entitled to work in exile, and their technical qualifications may not be internationally recognised should they return to Syria or resettle in Europe (Fincham, 2020). Female refugees have noted how nonformal programmes available to them often promote employment paths based on gendered stereotypes, such as 'Childcare' courses.

Although this complies with local cultural sensibilities, it provides female refugees with few options beyond complying with traditional gender norms (Fincham, 2020). With few transition mechanisms between TVET and academic programmes, there is little flexibility to change career paths should refugees later wish to do so. Thus, decisions made by donors and policymakers are likely to have lifelong consequences for Syrian youth in terms of the capability sets they are able to develop and the lives they are able to lead.

Online learning is seen as a viable way to achieve efficiency, as (assuming there is sufficient technological capacity), it has the potential to expand access to marginalised groups, such as the housebound, women with small children, people with disabilities and those in fulltime work. It also enables females to comply with the 'honour and shame' cultural paradigm (discussed later in the paper). However, within refugee contexts, online learning is often framed through a 'banking model' of education (Freire, 1970), whereby learners passively receive knowledge from 'experts' via the internet (Sancho-Gil *et al.*, 2019) (some positive examples of collaborative learning within online programmes for refugees are discussed in Pherali, Abu Moghli and Chase, 2020; Kennedy and Laurillard, 2019). Moreover, subjects leading to high status, financially lucrative careers are not available through online learning (e.g. medicine, engineering), restricting refugees' goals, limiting their capability sets and failing to address their complex social reasons for wanting to undertake HE (Fincham, 2020).

## Social constraints

Syrian refugees face many social constraints in exile, such as being separated from important kinship and social networks and being physically and socially isolated in camps or refugee enclaves in host countries (Watenpaugh, Fricke and Seigel, 2013; Watenpaugh, Fricke and King, 2014a). Female refugees are particularly vulnerable to social isolation, as they often have limited freedom of movement within the public sphere and limited engagement in paid work (Ahmed, 2012; Dunne *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, refugees with disabilities are often restricted to social interaction within their immediate families. Refugees who are unable to interact with host country nationals often live at the margins of society (Fincham, 2020).

## Social constraints and HE

HE can provide a number of social benefits for refugees, such as interaction with host country nationals, expansion of active social networks and development of the social and cultural capital needed for socio-economic integration (if not inclusion) into the host society (Sheehy, 2014; Wright and Plasterer, 2012; Bourdieu, 1986). HE can also help refugees to develop confidence and rebuild their lives with dignity (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019).

For Syrian refugees, however, HE does not always help in navigating the social constraints encountered in exile. Rather, donor and policymaker agendas focused on economic outcomes can undermine refugees' social motivations and needs through education, including meeting family expectations, belonging to a local community, developing friendships, fostering a social network, achieving an advanced social position and gaining respect from their community (Antonio, 2004; Mullen, 2009; Al-Fattal and Ayoubi, 2013). In this way, HE often falls short of enabling refugees to develop the full set of functionings and capabilities that they value.

In many cases, education programmes for refugees (particularly nonformal programmes) are bespoke, meaning that refugees become physically and socially isolated from host communities. Moreover, online learning is often implemented in ways which exacerbate refugees' social isolation (i.e. framed as sitting alone in front of a computer screen). This can be intensified for females who are often culturally restricted to home-based activities when not in education (Dunne *et al.*, 2017). In a study exploring Syrian youths' perceptions of HE opportunities on offer within the MENA region (Fincham 2020), female Syrian refugees in Jordan indicated that they had little motivation to study online, as they would not be able to physically interact with classmates, make friends or have personal contact with their professors. Female camp residents, in particular, had concerns about online learning, explaining how physically attending a university or college gave them reprieve from the psychological imprisonment of camp life. As many of their

desired functionings and capability sets were social, female refugees, in particular, felt that online learning (as it has often been framed and/or experienced within refugee contexts) did not meet their needs (Fincham, 2020).

Within the Syrian context, social motivations for wanting to undertake HE are highly gendered. As Syrian males have been culturally constructed as family breadwinners, they are more likely to want to pursue employment outcomes to enable them to marry and provide for their families (Buckner, 2013; Fincham, 2020). However, the proliferation of nonformal education programmes on offer for refugees (many of which are unaccredited) offer limited career pathways other than manual and technical work within the service, construction and retail sectors. Not only is this work low status and insecure, it offers limited earning potential, career progression and socio-economic mobility. In this way, HE provided for refugees is actually having a profound impact on men's ability to perform appropriate Syrian masculinities, delaying their ability to marry and limiting their marriage prospects (Fincham, 2020). It is also having a profound social influence on Syrian women. The MENA region has the world's lowest rate of female labour force participation, and cultural norms discourage all but professional employment for women (Buckner, 2013; Ahmed, 2012; Kabbani, 2009). As a result, Syrian females have to achieve a high level of education (university) in order to work (Buckner, 2013; Ahmed, 2012; Kabbani, 2009). Consequently, the proliferation of nonformal education opportunities for refugees, discussed above, is unlikely to improve women's economic participation or elevate their social status. In other words, it is unlikely to help female refugees to develop many of the functionings and capability sets that they value.

Within traditional Syrian culture, women are expected to comply with the 'honour and shame' paradigm, bearing responsibility for the 'honour' of their family and community through the regulation of their bodies and behaviour (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Dunne *et al.*, 2017). However, HE on offer for refugees does not always enable women to perform traditional Syrian femininities. For example,

education programmes scheduled in the evening or scholarships only redeemable at particular universities can require females to commute long distances after dark. Commuting on local public transportation may jeopardise women's 'honour' if it forces them to mix with (nonrelated) males and/or exposes them to public sexual harassment. Not only can insensitivity to local cultural norms by education policymakers and providers limit refugees' desired capability sets (e.g. the development of social and cultural capital, being respected by the community) (Bourdieu, 1986), it can have devastating social consequences for females, such as increasing their vulnerability to social exclusion, (involuntary) spinsterhood and domestic violence (Fincham, 2020).

## Political constraints

Syrian refugees also face many political constraints within the context of exile. For example, refugees' legal rights within host countries are often severely limited (Sheehy, 2014), and while most can choose to register with UNHCR, particular groups may find themselves outside of standard refugee protection due to complex identity configurations (e.g. Syrian Christians and Alawites who fear retribution from the Syrian authorities if they seek refugee status) (Hersh, 2013; Kreidie, 2018). Depending on refugees' political and sectarian positioning within the war in Syria, they may be differently positioned in relation to the host government. Refugees (or groups of refugees) who are perceived to be opponents of the government may have more restrictions placed on their mobility and experience particular socio-economic exclusion.

## Political constraints and HE

HE has the potential to nurture refugees' sense of belonging and facilitate their integration into the host society. For example, studying alongside host country populations in local institutions can construct a culture of cosmopolitanism<sup>1</sup>, promoting respect for diversity, tolerance and interconnectedness (Stevenson, 2003). Moreover, through an exchange of ideas and culture, universities can help refugees and host communities to become less susceptible to wider narratives of social exclusion and violence towards 'the other' (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004).

<sup>1</sup>Cosmopolitanism is defined here as 'an inclusive cultural democracy and citizenship' (Stevenson 2003: 5)

However, despite its potential benefits, HE does not always help refugees to successfully navigate the political constraints they encounter in exile. On the contrary, it can even exacerbate them. For example, within host countries, HE policies are often conceptualised with reference to a 'citizen subject', which presupposes certain rights and privileges, such as access to a valid passport and/or residence permit, access to academic diplomas and transcripts. However, as non-citizen 'others', refugees often lack these rights and freedoms. As most refugees left Syria abruptly due to the war, they were unable to bring with them the identity documentation and proof of former study required to apply for a scholarship or gain admission to university (Janmyr, 2016; Sheehy, 2014). This has resulted in many refugees becoming ineligible to enrol in HE in host countries, even though they may have legal access to it. Documentation is an example of how policies of 'equal opportunity' (treating refugees and host country nationals the same) have obscured the particular structural barriers disadvantaging refugees as 'non-citizens'.

Syrian refugees' political positioning can also have implications for the type of documentation they hold. While most hold a school-leaving Baccalaureate certificate issued by the Syrian government, some hailing from opposition-controlled areas hold the Interim Syrian Government-issued 'opposition certificate' (al i'tilaf). In Jordan and Lebanon, this is often not recognised nor accepted for enrolment in accredited HE programmes (Fincham, 2020). In this way, institutional rigidity coupled with 'one size fits all' admissions policies have become major obstacles for some refugees. These examples illustrate how structural and political factors often constrain refugees in their access to HE, as well as their ability to convert it into functionings and capability sets.

Syrian refugees construct their identities with reference to external and internal 'others' at the intersections of nation, religion and ethnicity. These complex allegiances of affiliation and difference profoundly impact their lives, as well as their

access to and experiences within HE. Donors and policymakers insensitive to the political and sectarian dimensions of the war in Syria, and the particular experiences of young Syrians, have sometimes offered university places to refugees in geographical locations dominated by a political or religious 'other' (e.g. pro-Syrian regime Shi'a dominated communities in Lebanon). This is an example of how HE opportunities may be made available for refugees, yet they are not necessarily acceptable to them (Tomasevski, 2006; Fincham, 2020).

Donors and policymakers have also been insensitive to the needs of refugees with complex identities, such as Palestinians from Syria, who do not conveniently fit within predetermined notions of authentic 'Syrian-ness', leaving them in legal, social and economic limbo with regard to rights and entitlements. As a consequence, these groups of refugees have often been overlooked in relation to HE scholarships and opportunities (Fincham, 2020). Treating refugees as a homogenous group without regard for individual difference has resulted in educational exclusion, unmet needs and broken dreams.

Some HE institutions in host countries have (often unintentionally) promoted a culture of exclusion, restricting refugees' psychological access to learning spaces, as well as negatively influencing their experiences within them. Syrian refugees have reported that they often experience implicit or explicit discrimination in HE institutions related to their status, ethnicity or religion/sect (King, 2014; Fincham, 2020). Not only do these experiences of discrimination compound the psychological trauma refugees experience in exile, they also impact their desires to remain in HE and influence their long-term goals for resettlement (Watenpaugh, Fricke and King 2014a; Fincham, 2020). This is an example of how a simplistic focus only on access to HE can obscure harmful factors within education which constrain refugees from living their best lives (Tomasevski, 2006).

## Conclusion

HE has the potential to help refugees successfully navigate the economic, social and political constraints they encounter in exile. However, in practice, it has often failed to live up to its potential, sometimes even exacerbating the challenges faced within displacement settings. While HE opportunities for Syrian refugees have increased, they have often been conceptualised by donors and policymakers through a neoliberal lens with a focus on 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness', limiting refugees' opportunities to develop the full set of functionings and capabilities that they value. Moreover, policies of 'equal opportunity' have often been paradoxically discriminatory, as they have treated all groups of refugees the same and refugees the same as host country nationals. This has obscured the structural inequalities that exist between citizens and refugees and between different groups of refugees. Finally, donor and policy agendas supportive of particular education strategies (e.g. employment-focused nonformal programmes, TVET, online learning) and collective outcomes (e.g. education for employability) have undermined refugees' agency to make individual choices between different functionings and capability sets. While access to HE for Syrian refugees has steadily increased in quantitative terms, without a corresponding expansion of their freedoms, education as an unquestioned force for good is put into question.

## Author Bio

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جامعة القاهرة



# The survival of universities in contested territories: Findings from two roundtable discussions on institutions in the North West of Syria.



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## Abstract

This paper draws on discussions around the future of higher education (HE) in Syria after nearly a decade of violent conflict. Focusing on universities in non-regime-controlled areas, it illustrates the difficulties of sector-wide planning and the provision of institutional support during protracted conflict in areas with no single state entity or ministerial support.

## Key Words

Syria

Conflict

Universities

Academics

## Universities in Syria

Prior to the conflict Syria in 2011 there was a thriving and rapidly expanding university sector with five public institutions, a virtual public university, a growing number of new private academies, and around 371,343 students (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Since 2001, there had been a number of sector-wide attempts at modernisation to broaden access and align studies more closely with market requirements (Dillabough *et al.*, 2018: 7). However, the events of 2011 and subsequent years undermined any reforms that had occurred and inevitably led to the fragmentation and depletion of the whole sector. Public sector finance was channelled into the military and the war effort and any resource spent on education focused on what was seen as more urgent primary and secondary provision (Dillabough *et al.*, 2019: 27).

Universities continued to function throughout the conflict and two studies in particular have documented their progress. Milton (2019) looked largely at regime-controlled areas and found that ‘under conditions of highly destructive warfare involving multiple parties, foreign intervention, and the territorial fragmentation of the Syrian state’, enrolment rates continued to be high while attendance rates dramatically fell. Any existing research activity all but disappeared as many skilled academics were forced into exile, international collaborations were disrupted, and data collection and field work became unsafe (Milton, 2019: 38). Milton (2019) further identified difficulties in maintaining quality teaching and learning and supporting student transition to employment, ongoing evidence of corruption and an inevitable black market in exam questions and fake diplomas as students tried to gain evidence of studies in order

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to secure employment. The Cambridge report, also published in 2019, pointed out 'heightened and intense politicisation', as institutions became aligned with different political groupings, whilst other problems included the lack of accountability, curriculum stagnation and huge gaps in student learning as classes were disrupted and in some cases, the whole campus infrastructure was destroyed (Dillabough et al., 2019: 5). In areas which are not controlled by the Assad regime, there are additional challenges relating to the lack of governmental support, large internally displaced populations (IDPs) and continued shelling (Shaban, 2020; Al Ogla, 2019). All of this has had a huge impact on quality of provision, the existence and value of any qualifications and the future of a generation of young people.

As areas controlled by the regime have shifted, so too have the institutions within them. In non-regime-controlled areas of the North West, universities have emerged to replace former government institutions. Idlib University was established as a branch of the University of Aleppo (now affiliated to the so called 'Salvation Government') and Free Aleppo University, affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government, was established in 2014. The Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), supported the establishment of Sham International University in 2015 and Harran, a Turkish University, made a decision to open a branch in Al Bab, co-located with Free Aleppo University (FAU), between Azaz and Mare (close to IDP camps in the Euphrates Shield region). A conflict of interest developed between Harran and Gaziantep Universities as to who should supervise Turkish universities in the North of Syria, and this has since been awarded to Gaziantep who have opened three faculties in the region: Education in Afrin, Economy and Management in al-Bab, and Islamic studies in Azaz.

These different alignments inevitably impact on universities' security and vulnerability to bombardment, but also affect their access to trained academics, regulated curricula, recognised accreditation and certification and international funding. The 'Salvation Government' and the Syrian Interim Government are not formally recognised by the international community which leaves them outside of international protection and support. The Education 2030 Framework for Action (EFA) promoted by UNESCO includes

measures designed to support HE, based on the premise that a well-established and well-regulated tertiary education system can improve access, equity, quality and relevance, support sustainable development and operate through distance learning (Eck, Naidoo and Sachs-Israel, 2016). All of this could make a significant difference in a conflict affected or fragile context. Although UNESCO is mandated to support all levels of education, including tertiary, it works through governments of member states and has limited powers to intervene in contested areas. The EFA framework is also designed to operate through democratic government processes, and therefore ineffective in divided or disputed territories. While civil society and INGO support is available to them (and The Turkish Humanitarian Relief foundation has played a role in this), such funding is often directed towards schooling, generally seen as a greater priority by the international community. For example, The World Bank brief (2018) on Education in Fragile, Conflict and Violence Contexts focuses entirely on school education.

## Methodology

The data for this paper was collected from two roundtable discussions hosted by Cara (Council for At Risk Academics) in July 2019 and February 2020 respectively, involving exiled academics and organisations who support education in conflict affected areas. The first brought together academics, INGOs, NGOs, UN agencies, government and practitioners from within Syria and from other conflict and post-conflict contexts to reflect on how universities might be supported and sustained and their potential role in the reconstruction effort. The second Roundtable involved a smaller group of invited local academics and representatives from International Sham University and Free Aleppo University to allow for more focused discussions on how institutions in the North of Syria might be supported to continue. It also looked at the role that Syrian academics in exile and the broader international community, particularly those involved in direct response, might play in providing coordinated support. Many of those who attended the Roundtables spoke of the reality of a 'lost generation' of academics, students and professionals who, due to destruction of the sector or their displacement, were unable to study or work.

Universities are mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and can make an important contribution to goals related to poverty reduction (SDG1); health and well-being (SDG3); gender equality governance (SDG5); decent work and economic growth (SDG8); responsible consumption and production (SDG12); climate change (SDG13); and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG16) and have the potential to play a significant role in conflict management and in recovery (Milton, S., 2013). Contextual knowledge, access to affected communities and the ability to gather and analyse data in areas not accessible to international researchers, can all make important contributions both to maintaining resilience within conflict situations and to recovery and reconstruction. Universities also often have some form of broader social mission (Millican and Bourner, 2014), which, if properly implemented can respond directly to the professional, social and economic needs of their local communities, particularly important when state provision is disrupted or destroyed. Birzeit University, one of the international participants at the first Roundtable, recounted their own history of establishing themselves as an educational institution, without formal state support, able to respond to crucial educational and societal needs during conflict (Kuttab in Millican, 2018). Operating during some of the most violent periods of Palestinian Israeli history, Birzeit remains a thriving university with a clear social mission and focusing on teaching, research and community work. The Roundtable discussions looked at how a coordinated response, led by Syrians in exile but supported by the international university sector, might be used to address some of the realities experienced by universities, their faculty members and their students in the North West Region of Syria.

### Institutions in the North West region

It is important to emphasise that these institutions are continuing to operate and their resilience and ability to move and re-establish themselves multiple times, is impressive. International Sham University now has five faculties: Education, Sharia and Law, Economics and Business Management, Engineering, and Political Science. There are 65 staff teaching in Sham, many of whom come from FAU to teach part time, 860 students and, in March 2020 Sham held its first graduation ceremony.

Free Aleppo University (FAU), established in 2015 after fighting in Aleppo, necessitated staff and student groups disbanding and relocating to non-regime-controlled areas. Initially (2015–18), they set up branches in Daraa, Homs, Ghoutta, Idlib and West Aleppo but these were captured by the regime in 2018, and again by the Salvation Government early in 2019, leading to the loss of all 14 faculties. Many of these faculties have since been re-established in Azaz and Mare, and there are now 14 faculties and 4 two-year technical institutions. Subjects include IT, Medicine, Electronics, Dentistry, Law, Economics, and Islamic Studies, there are 96 staff members and over 5,000 students. Newly established facilities include a central library (with 4,500 books) and 40 auditoria/lecture halls, with new laboratories under construction in 2020.

The university offers student certificates and held its first formal certificate awarding ceremony in 2020. However, as of May 2020 these certificates are only recognised in North Syria and some parts of Turkey, meaning graduates working in other areas only have the option to be employed by Syrian run or Syrian leaning institutions, or in INGOs based on their skills, experiences or references. As degree certificates are not recognised by public institutions in Turkey or by Turkish professional bodies many of them are unable to work in the areas in which they have studied (based on recent private conversations with academics in the region).

FAU has recently started to publish two journals and is planning to establish a research centre with a focus on reconstruction and societal recovery, including child labour (as children under 10 often become sole breadwinners for families); underage marriage (and subsequent links to young widowhood); plummeting levels of literacy and massive school drop-out rates amongst IDPs; rising infant mortality rates; and the gender imbalance left by deaths of males leading to resurgence in multiple marriages, etc. The university is also developing population studies for the region with questionnaires already prepared and students trained to undertake surveys as soon as funds become available.

The rector of Sham International University outlined his plans for various societal-facing activities during the Roundtable meetings. This included the development of an 'Early warning system' focused on the social protection of students, many of whom

live in areas where there is a breakdown of social and cultural norms. The university was looking for financial support for an initiative which would provide practical training for students taking political science degrees to collect data on life in IDP camps and to monitor the safety of all young people. Sham already offers lectures on conflict management and plans for students to interweave social duties with academic study, supported by staff trained in community mediation techniques. A whole institution approach, with students taking computing science degrees preparing templates for online monitoring and reporting of activities, would enable the university to map areas of community unrest and request third-party intervention if local tensions developed. In January 2020 it was reported that female students were already acting as teachers in the camps and the university was looking for ways to extend community involvement in other areas by locating graduates in secondary schools trained to provide similar support.

FAU's plans for a research centre and Sham International's Early Warning project are both examples of ways in which HE can contribute to societal well-being in the absence of coherent state support.

### **Recommendations emerging from the Roundtable discussions: July 2019 and February 2020**

The first Roundtable discussion focused on the challenges and recommendations for Syrian HE that had emerged from an earlier Cara study (Dillabough *et al.*, 2019). These were: Politicisation of HE in Conflict; Curriculum Stagnation, Constrained Internationalisation and the Disappearance of Research; and Challenges of Access, Transition and Progression to Employment. Such challenges are common to many universities attempting to operate in a conflict context and the following were identified as priority areas for response:

1. The introduction of civilian personnel training in conflict reduction approaches;
2. A civic mission adopted by universities with standards of transparency, academic freedom and cultural pluralism;
3. Modernisation and capacity building for academics in research, teaching and curriculum development;
4. Recognition of the role of academics in supporting and informing those responding to the current crisis and in any future reconstruction process; and
5. Stabilisation of the current context and protection of institutions, their students and faculty members.

These areas overlap and are inter-connected and it was felt that in order to retain independence and a Syrian identity, the Syrian academic community had to itself take a lead in moving the agenda forward. This first Roundtable expressed a pressing need for Syrian academics to collaborate and organise, to provide mutual support to colleagues and students whether in exile or in the country.

During the second Roundtable, discussions were more focused on identifying a way forward. There was general agreement around the importance of maintaining freedom of expression, within individual institutions of rigour in research and the production of knowledge and in academic standards. Politicisation was frequently discussed with an awareness of the impossibility of surviving on the ground without some sort of affiliation with a political party to provide them with legitimacy and protection as well as some kind of financial support. However, there was an awareness of the negative impact this can have on issues such as academic freedom, curriculum development and bias and student voice.

It was agreed that, if universities are able to continue, they can play an important role in the economy, in systems of governance and in societal reconstruction as well as in the lives and futures of individual students. There was also an acknowledgement of how gender relationships in societies undergoing conflict are disproportionately focused on the needs and leadership of men and the importance of improving the position and representation of women in society when building peace. It was felt that the societal-facing role of a university included shaping culture and values and that facilitating access to higher education (HE) for women and including women in key decision-making university bodies could make a significant contribution to wider progress in addressing this imbalance.

However, a key issue that arose in both Roundtable events was the added difficulty of operating in

a region that had no internationally recognised government. UNESCO, confined to working through states, is largely unable to provide support. Registering as a legal entity is difficult in an insecure or stateless environment, often precluding international recognition or accreditation. Governmental donors are reluctant to support unrecognised authorities and financial donors are often unable to transfer money to individuals working outside of registered organisations. Licensing and quality assurance remained priorities for individual institutions as did accreditation and certification for students.

A number of suggestions emerged for ways forward:

### **For academics in exile**

#### **Forming a professional research consortium**

Research provides an opportunity for academics in exile to participate in an academic arena, reclaim their academic identity and practice, and contribute to addressing the challenges facing their countries, enabling responders to the crisis to benefit from local knowledge and networks. Forming a research consortium using a consultancy model could enable Syrian academics to work effectively on applied research that has significant local value. It could also act as an academic support network facilitating 'bottom-up' (alongside 'top-down') collaborations outside of the mainstream academia. A consultancy model is more likely to be self-financing in the longer term but would require a significant amount of start-up capital in the early stages. Registering as an independent academic institution in Turkey is not straightforward, but locating this entity close to the Turkish-Syrian border with easy entry into Syria would help facilitate cross border research<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Building on individual research collaborations**

Professional research connections and collaborations with international counterparts, facilitated at the individual or small group level, could also provide the foundation for the development of institutional relationships over time. Individual academic affiliation and institutional connection provide legitimacy and provide access to expensive resources such as academic journals or laboratory equipment. Eventually, extending this to include affiliation to a larger group could also provide an institutional

home for a Syrian-led research centre. Such affiliations should be possible in situations of conflict or post-conflict transitions, if undertaken transparently and with clear awareness of motives on all sides.

#### **Creating a cluster of discipline-based research centres**

Rather than a single base, a series of real or virtual research centres could focus particularly on Syrian issues and location-based education and research. These could be stand-alone, under the umbrella of existing universities using models of research centres in other universities and would offer a clear mission and focus for research and pedagogy. They would also provide an opportunity to build partnerships with the broader international academic community.

#### **Supporting internal dialogue with mediation by international organisations**

There was a reiterated need for dialogue with ministries for HE in a range of international contexts in order to move towards a stronger and more unified vision, mission and role for the sector. Taking a unified approach to putting the future of Syrian HE, and the importance of HE in conflict regions, on to international agendas would facilitate funding and help leverage political support. An international body, such as UNESCO, may be in a position to influence national government ministries to recognise and support institutions outside their areas of political control.

### **For institutions in the North**

#### **Developing internal HE frameworks and accessing online training in teaching and teacher development**

In conflict-affected areas, where experienced academics may have been killed or forced into exile, institutions are often staffed by younger, more recent graduates who lack experience in teaching. In the absence of teacher development programmes there are few opportunities for them to improve beyond internal mentoring or learning on the job. Suggestions were made around sharing and adapting a Higher Education Fellowship scheme and supporting institutions to adapt competency frameworks to meet their own needs and contexts. These could be supplemented by existing online teacher development materials and internal support from experienced academics still residing in country.

<sup>1</sup>This has since been done and the institution is now an emerging research hub in Gaziantep, applying for research funds via UK Research Council's Global Challenges Research Fund.

### **Keeping records of curricula, course programmes and monitoring and evaluation procedures**

In the absence of formal internal licensing, institutions need to set up cloud-based data sets of students, academics, curriculum outlines and assessment frameworks in order to demonstrate academic rigour and quality assurance. International partnerships with recognised and well-established universities elsewhere could offer examples of workable systems for this, alongside distance-based support in introducing and implementing them.

### **Working to ensure consistency between course and curriculum content and keeping student transcripts**

Accredited certificates are important for students in fragile or fluid contexts where displacement and migration are the norm. Students are often forced to move to other areas before completing their studies or trying to progress to work without internationally recognised diplomas. A consortium of networked institutions in the region could commit to sharing and, where possible, aligning course content and developing transcripts of student achievement. Cloud-based repositories, accessible from remote locations, would enable students to transition between, or on from, university study with clear records of completion.

## **Conclusion**

The introduction of Westernised peace-promoting curricula in conflict-affected countries has the potential to aggravate conflict drivers by positioning liberal and more radical schools against each other in national-level competitions for ideological dominance. This does not mean that the promotion of liberal values should be abandoned in education programming in conflict-affected states, but rather that operating on small, short-term scales, or on a project by project basis, without analysing how the introduction of new curricula would impact on communities educated to opposing ideals, could cause more violence in the short term. Inherently, the needs of peacebuilding education require long-term funding commitment, and perhaps

a push for consolidated education reform, that addresses the divisions between different education systems. However, reform for the sake of reform is insufficient, unless it is combined with meaningful and long-term support to teachers and teacher training. While more research is needed to compare across conflict-affected states, a greater emphasis should be placed on the role of the teacher in interpreting the official curriculum for their students, as well as on the importance of contextualisation in peace education. The two go hand in hand: the role of the teacher in a classroom is to help guide students through new concepts and complex ideas, and they do this by translating those ideas into terms that they deem relevant to their students, to ease understanding. The more alien a curriculum seems to a teacher, the more aggressive the translation process is likely to be. These decisions are rarely made with the intention to harm students or to obstruct their learning but unless this process is understood, the gap between an intended liberal curriculum and what is actually taught may have far-reaching unintended impacts that harm (rather than support) the peace process, particularly when students graduate from these systems and are confronted with a divided political society that does not share their views.

## **Author Bio**

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# Lessons from an evolving model to support higher education in countries affected by conflict



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## Abstract

This article draws lessons from two programmes designed to support Higher Education (HE) in Iraq and Syria, two countries severely affected by violent conflict. The programmes focus on support to Iraqi and Syrian academics through capacity development and collaborative research, involving international partnerships.

## Key Words

Higher education partnerships

Conflict

Syria

Iraq

Academics

## Introduction

Interventions to support Higher Education (HE) in countries affected by conflict broadly tend to focus on how to support students. One of the very few organisations that support academics who are affected by conflict or political persecution is Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics), a UK-based non-governmental organisation, which designs and implements programmes with financial support from international trusts and foundations. In contrast to most other interventions that support HE in the conflict-affected region, the focus of the Cara programmes has been on the needs of academics rather than students.

This article is largely based on three independent evaluations carried out by the author in 2011 (for the Iraq programme) and 2017 and 2019 (for the Syria programme). In each case the evaluation took a mixed-method approach and the evaluator had access to internal documentation and data. The evaluation drew on programme monitoring and other data including needs assessments, English language test scores, online platform participation rates and financial data in combination with data drawn from interviews, focus group discussions and observation of workshops in action in Istanbul (for the Syria programme) and roundtable in Beirut (for the Iraq programme) to enable quantitative and qualitative analysis. A total of 112 interviews were conducted across the three evaluations, which included Iraqi and Syrian academics participating in the programmes, international academics taking part in research projects and as workshop facilitators, tutors of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and members of the Cara team.

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## The crises in Iraq and Syria

Following two decades of sanctions, in 2003, the US-led coalition forces invaded Iraq and toppled the Saddam Hussein government. Prior to the war, the quality and standard of HE was a source of pride in Iraq (Jawad, 2014). After the invasion, Iraqi higher education suffered significant infrastructure damage with buildings burned, looted or destroyed, and Iraqi academics were among the groups targeted by a range of factions involved in the conflict (AAAS, 2013; UNESCO, 2004). Security concerns remained a key priority for Iraqi academics throughout the decade following the invasion, both for those outside of Iraq considering a return and for those who had chosen to stay despite the ongoing violent conflict.

The uprising in Syria began in 2011 and rapidly escalated to an intense conflict with a proliferation of factions fighting both Assad government forces and each other, supported by a range of regional and international actors. By 2016 when the Cara Syria programme was being developed, over 6.3 million of Syria's 23 million population had fled Syria, mainly to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, with a further six million internally displaced (UNHCR, 2017). Since the start of the uprising, Syrian academics have suffered widespread persecution, including arbitrary arrest and detention, and disappearance, and in 2013 both Aleppo and Damascus universities were bombed with resulting fatalities (Dillabough *et al.*, 2019). As had been the case in Iraq, relatively higher economic status of academics in the Syrian society made them a target of kidnappers (Dillabough *et al.*, 2019; see Pherali in this issue). By 2014, staff and student levels in HE had fallen considerably.

In response to these situations in both countries and rising requests from academics for assistance, Cara developed programmes of support which are discussed below.

## The Cara response

Since 1933, Cara has provided support to academics at risk in the form of practical and financial aid aiming to enable them to continue their work in safety. Since 2015, Cara's work has been supported by a growing network of UK universities that now number 121 and make up 'the Cara Scholars at Risk UK Universities Network'. They form a crucial component in the provision of what are now primarily post-doctoral and doctoral Fellowship opportunities framed as

'temporary sanctuary' for academics at risk pending return to their countries of origin when security allows (Cara, 2020). Since 2006 and beginning with the Iraq programme later followed by the Syria programme, given the scale of targeted attacks on academics, Cara introduced Country Programmes to allow affected academics to be supported in their own countries or within countries of their exile. It is this latter evolving model of support that is discussed here in terms of its results and the factors that enabled and constrained opportunities for continuation or development of their academic lives.

In the case of both Iraq and Syria, the respective conflicts and resulting geographic dispersal led to isolation for many displaced academics and the loss of their academic identities and endeavours. The CARA Iraq Programme was launched in late 2006, offering UK Fellowships, extending to the region to support those in exile in Amman, Jordan, in 2008. Initially, playing a brokering and connecting role and then rolling out a broader programme in 2009 which ran for three years (based on a personal interview with a Cara official).

The broader programme aimed to connect Iraqi academics to international academia as well as to connect Iraqi academics outside of Iraq with those within Iraq. In particular, it aimed to engage Iraqi academics in meaningful academic work, to produce innovative research of immediate relevance to Iraq, as well as to enhance Iraq's research capacities and lastly, to nurture lasting international research collaboration. At the core of the Iraq programme was the Iraq Research Fellowship Scheme, which used an innovative research partnership model combining Iraqi academics in exile, Iraqi academics still active in Iraq and international, mainly UK-based, academics in research projects with the international academics in the role of Principal Investigators (PIs). PIs provided their services on a pro bono basis. The programme aimed to facilitate collaborative research with projects selected through a competitive process. Successful research project proposals were awarded grants of up to UK£25,000. The Iraq programme was run out of Amman, Jordan, where Cara facilitated the gathering of research teams, provided capacity-building workshops and opportunities for collaboration. Cara also organised regional roundtables to engage regional experts, for dissemination, for cross fertilisation of ideas, to encourage the development of regional networks and



enable links to future funders and wider initiatives. A total of 58 Iraqi academics directly participated in the programme as part of international research teams. Results of the programme are discussed below. The programme ended in 2012 when funding came to an end which coincided with the international community's attention moving to the new conflict in Syria and thus meant that Cara did not have the resources to continue its Iraq programme.

Cara launched its Syria programme in 2012 through its core Fellowship Programme offering temporary sanctuary placement, in partnership with UK universities, to Syrian academics at risk. Cara extended the programme to the region following a process of consultation and programme design. The country programme was established in Turkey where the greatest number of Syrian academics had fled to safety. The Syria programme shared some objectives to those of the Iraq programme intending to enable Syrian academics in the region to continue academic engagement and contribution, to facilitate their professional development and to produce research relevant to Syria or Syrian communities in exile in receiving countries in the region. The programme aims to sustain and invest in this group given their potentially important role in rebuilding Syria's HE sector and in broader post-conflict reconstruction in the future. The Syria Programme in the region entered its third year in 2020.

The Syria Programme builds on the Iraqi Programme model with added provision of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), a blended learning element facilitated by primarily UK university EAP specialists on a voluntary basis encompassing weekly one-to-one online sessions and workshops in Istanbul. It also included a more structured academic skills development component provided through quarterly workshops in Istanbul and various online methods and platforms; 3–8 week long research incubation visits (RIVs) to the UK universities to enable networking, training and the development of research ideas and collaborations between Syrian and UK-based academics; and funding for research on issues relevant to Syria, including Syrian HE and its role in addressing Syrian societal challenges and immediate and future challenges. The programme also included the Iraq equivalent, Syria Research Fellowship Scheme through which grants were awarded on a competitive basis but was modified with the

introduction of a larger number of smaller grants. The small grants (UK£3,000) and larger (UK£15,000) research grants were awarded through a Cara-run grant selection process, involving independent experts in the Selection Committee. In the Syria programme, successful research grants are subject to successful ethics processes facilitated by the mentors and PIs' institutions. Activities in the Syria Programme, like those of the Iraq Programme encompass the full spectrum of disciplines from the arts and humanities, the social sciences and the physical sciences.

A significant difference in the Syria programme is that it has also allowed participation of individuals beyond the research teams who have attended workshops that were organised in Istanbul and participated in online initiatives such as the weekly webinar series or short courses delivered through dedicated programme platforms. By 2019, over 149 Syrian academics had been participating in one or more of the programme activities, of which 53 participated in research collaborations with international counterparts, including those from Turkey.

## The results

The evaluations found that both the Syria and Iraq Programmes produced a range of positive results, which can be divided into: a) outcomes for individual participants; b) HE development in Iraq and Syria; and c) wider HE developments beyond Iraq and Syria.

### Outcomes for individuals

Programme participants reported results relating to their professional development and also to their improved well-being. These results are interconnected.

Evaluations of both programmes found evidence of enhanced academic skills including in research methodology and methods, academic writing and teamwork, and in subject-specific technical areas such as laboratory techniques and management. Participants also increased their awareness and understanding of international research standards and improved their English language skills. These were identified through participant self-reporting, facilitator observations and through tests such as English language skills. Participants demonstrated and reported new and enhanced academic skills in general.

A significant addition to the Syria programme – introduced due to the experience of the Iraq programme – was the inclusion of a dedicated component focused on EAP. Participants also reported that their increased EAP skills were useful in accessing critical international literature in their subject areas for research and teaching and being able to share their research findings internationally through conference presentations and academic publications. EAP also enabled improved communication with potential research funders and with those who may draw on their expertise as researchers or as advisers (e.g. policymakers from international organisations or humanitarian practitioners responding to the crisis). It was found that younger participants tended to progress faster with language skills. Some participants were challenged by limited time, lack of motivation and internet connectivity for the online initiatives, which slowed their progress. However, the one-to-one relationship with online tutors for EAP has proved to be important to both participant and tutor alike.

In terms of individual well-being, participants' own observations of the results are striking. Iraqi and Syrian participants consistently emphasised the sense of self-respect and dignity that re-engagement with the academic community and acknowledgement of their professional academic identity provided, as the following quotes illustrate:

Cara preserved my academic place... I've remained an academic, which is a great thing for my self-respect. (Iraqi participant)

When I came to Turkey in 2015, I was discouraged and frustrated. I didn't find work. I was outside the academic environment. I love academic work. When I started to meet with Cara and other colleagues it was very good for me. It encouraged me to work, to write something, to feel about myself as an academic. I had lost that feeling. (Syrian participant)

This programme was very beneficial for us, after the circumstances we have been living, after all routes were cut off around us, the roads towards research were closed in our faces. This programme is like a candle that is a light in a very dark tunnel. (Syrian participant)

Some of the benefits for these conflict-affected academics derive from their contact with other academics from their own country. This was a noticeable benefit for Iraqi academics in exile who were often dispersed geographically. In the longer-term Syria Programme, participants have created informal networks among themselves using WhatsApp and other platforms to share information and maintain contact among themselves inbetween the regular Istanbul-based workshops. They remarked on the emotional support this provides and their strategic use of the networks in planning their own activities to support Syrian HE in non-regime areas in the North. Some participants and their UK-based academic colleagues have been working collaboratively on grant supported research and have also developed plans for cooperation beyond the lifetime of the Cara programmes.

### Benefits for HE development in Iraq and Syria

Benefits of the programme for HE include the development of a group of academics with enhanced skills, some of whom already and, in the future, will support teaching and research in their countries of origin. In the Iraq Programme, institutional relationships were established with some UK universities which went beyond the individual academics' connections to an institutional level as evidenced, for instance, by the establishment of two memoranda of understanding for cooperation between some Iraq and UK universities including between Liverpool and Mosul as well as Leicester and Kerbala universities.

In relation to Syria, the programme has contributed to the development of a cadre of approximately 150 academics with enhanced research and teaching skills. Their sustained academic engagement will potentially benefit Syrian HE in the future, if and when conflict ends, and the post-war recovery and reconstruction begins. Indeed, the programme already contributes through those who hold teaching posts in Turkish universities with Syrian student cohorts as well as in non-regime areas of Syria. The participants report using new teaching techniques they have learned on the programme and their vice chancellors have reported their observations of improved skills.

Furthermore, the programme has funded research that focuses directly on the challenges facing Syrian HE both before and since the war began, as well as research on what role HE can play in the future of Syria. These will form valuable resources to the development of policy and strategy in support of Syrian HE into the future. These direct inputs to Syrian HE and previously to Iraqi HE have been complemented by Cara's advocacy with donors, policy makers and the international university community for attention to HE in countries affected by conflict. This has been achieved through its publications, direct communication and facilitation of contact between the academics and these decisionmakers through roundtables (see Millican in this issue).

### Wider benefits beyond HE in Syria and Iraq

A criterion of Cara-supported research is its potential contribution to the future of the conflict-affected countries, in this case, Iraq and Syria. This has been evident in both programmes, with benefits in other areas of life affected by the conflicts, beyond the direct impacts for HE. In Iraq, for example, the programme contributed to the work of the then newly formed Ministry for Women, to the Ministry of Education with analysis and evidence of the ethnic, religious and gender bias of teaching materials, and in health with research on the use of evolving communication technologies to improve health outcomes linked to vaccination programmes and the treatment of diabetes.

Research outputs relevant to Syria's future include the documentation and mapping of the impact of the Syria crisis on key areas such as deforestation, archaeology (see Abdullah *et al.* in this issue) and agriculture (see Abdullateef *et al.* in this issue). The Syria Programme supported research is also looking at the development of techniques and innovative approaches to support Syria in the future, such as the recycling of concrete rubble from destroyed buildings as reconstruction materials and the conservation of genetic materials and seeds from often unique habitats. New professional collaborations born from the Syria Programme research and Syrian academics' RIVs to UK institutions may also have longer-term research benefits in the areas such as, seed conservation.

The Syrian academics are also contributing to UK-funded research initiatives in and around Syria through partnerships facilitated by Cara but funded by UK universities and research councils. These emerging relationships may also be useful in the future reconstruction of Syrian HE.

The programme has in effect nurtured a significant proportion of the Syrian academic community that intends to play an active role in Syria's future in their relevant disciplines. This role is one that academics did not play to such a large extent in the past but one that is being shaped by the research on the role of HE in Syria; exposure to the practices in the UK; collaborations with other academics; and how these processes influence policies.

### Factors constraining and enabling positive results for and by HE in times of conflict

#### Constraints

The unstable political and security environment has been one of the key challenges to the programmes. In Iraq, ongoing instability and frequent political changes in the government meant that relationships established during research processes tend to hinder recommendations and outcomes relevant for policies and practice.

In the Syria Programme, the attempted coup in Turkey and following clampdown by the Turkish government made universities cautious about cooperation with a UK-based NGO in support of Syrian academics. This disrupted some of the original plans of the programme for greater engagement with Turkish universities at the institutional level. Also, the ongoing stresses and unpredictability of life of Syrian academics in Turkey with, among others, concerns about their families and friends who are still in Syria. Constraints on employment and movement within Turkey, as well as the demand to learn another language to operate in Turkey limit the individual level engagement in and contribution to the programme.

Issues external to the region also present challenges. For example, restrictive visa regimes affect Syrian academics' possibility to travel to the UK, disrupting plans for RIVs to UK universities.

Funding is always a challenge and while the programmes enjoyed support from a number of foundations, the limited scale, continuity and predictability of funds have at times made programme planning and scheduling difficult, which is an issue when so many activities and their success depend on the voluntary contributions of many actors.

An additional challenge within the programmes is that participants do not always recognise some of their capacity building needs identified by the academics facilitating the programme. There had been a trend in both countries to attribute lower value or priority to independent research than teaching, and methods for teaching were found to be out dated. The programme has also found this difference in perspectives regarding skill levels and capacity development. These aspects are sensitive issues among older participants who may have been in more senior positions in their home universities and so the programme facilitators have taken a cautious approach to capacity building, being mindful and respectful about participants' longstanding experience in HE.

### Enabling factors

A key component of both programmes which has proven highly effective is the research partnership between academics from the conflict-affected countries and experienced colleagues from the wider international academic community, usually the UK-based given Cara's base and its existing network universities. The collaborative approach to research, including that supported through competitively awarded grants contributed to a range of results including capacity building within the team; the production of quality research; and the establishment of sustainable international partnerships. Smaller grants of UK£3,000 were introduced for Syrian academics to apply for projects which did not necessarily include an international PI but were an opportunity for the Syrian academics to develop new independent projects based on the learning and areas covered in the academic skills development seminars. The programme found that including international academics as mentors was important to support the capacity development process as well as the quality of outputs.

A second key factor enabling impact in professional development is the multi-pronged approach to capacity development. Both programmes found that most of the academics from these two conflict-affected countries had had very limited contact, if any, with academia outside their own countries and so little familiarity with some of the international standards and good practice in research or teaching. Their publications were often limited, primarily to in-house university journals published in Arabic. A multi-pronged approach has been shown to be necessary to address the challenges that largely stem from the lack of experience and exposure in the international arena. As noticed by international academic facilitators and selection committee members, participants' limited understanding of key concepts has been apparent across the research process from design to write up. These include processes for ethics, risk assessment and informed consent or experience of data management and the presentation of a literature review in terms of locating research within the wider literature. Most participants have had little or no experience of qualitative research methodologies and methods. They also often displayed limitations in skills for research data collection, data analysis and academic writing.

A key lesson emerging from the programme is that a multi-faceted or a blended learning approach is required to enhance academic development among the participants. Through the Cara-funded research, this approach involved in-person workshops, online webinars and other e-learning initiatives allied to the 'learning-through-doing' opportunities. It was found that a range of combined inputs enables the reinforcement of learning. Initial programme plans under-estimated the time and the range of ways that would be needed to build these skills, however, flexibility in the programme has enabled new approaches to be added for a multi-faceted approach responding to a range of skill levels and learning styles.

A third important characteristic of the programme has been its flexibility and in particular, its customised approach to support participants, most notable in the Syrian Programme. Certain activities are available to all participants such as workshops for academic skills development and participants manage their own levels of involvement.

Activities such as the EAP support is designed on a one-to-one basis. Support for UK-visits for research and development purposes and the matching of Syrian with UK academics is tailored to individual participant needs and interests. This approach is time intensive and relies on a proactive and committed approach by the Cara team with valuable support from academics involved in the programme. A fourth significant enabling feature of the programme has been the volunteer nature of many of the people involved in both the development and delivery of the Syria programme, including EAP tutors and coordinators, academic skills development workshop facilitators, research team mentors and PIs, independent experts and readers and editors. The stability of the network of volunteer contributors who have remained with the programme for as long as three years has been key. They reported the satisfaction they gained in their roles, particularly from the creative space they have had to contribute to the evolution of an innovative programme and to support colleagues experiencing hardship due to conflict. Some UK academics have also gained academic benefits through collaborations with Syrian and Iraqi colleagues as research implementation without strong local networks and connections would have been impossible. Also, UK universities have contributed in-kind support by providing accommodation and bursaries, as well as covering consumable costs, providing affiliation and some direct sponsorship of UK research visits by the Syrian and Iraqi academics. The most recent evaluation estimated that the level of resources leveraged by the Syria Programme was well over UK £350,000 per year, enhancing its budget by over 30 percent (Hanley, 2020).

Finally, the shared principles of all those involved in the programme have been another contributing factor to the positive impact. These evolved organically and can be characterised as a mutual professional respect, a sense of equality between all academics on the programme – Syrian, Iraqi or UK-based, a willingness to be flexible, an interest to innovate and responsiveness to opportunities. This has enabled the growth of a collegiate network and responsive, relevant programme.

## Conclusion

The two programmes' approach to enable ongoing academic engagement of Iraqi and Syrian academics affected by conflict demonstrate the possibility to achieve positive results for academics themselves, for HE development generally and for wider societal benefits in countries affected by conflict. Ongoing instability makes the long-term impact difficult to guarantee, however, it seems clear that the creation of a committed, high quality and engaged academics is a way forward for rebuilding HE in Iraq and Syria. The production of new research which is relevant to those countries and the creation of national and international networks can serve for the future recovery of HE and wider development in countries affected by conflict. The programmes demonstrate the importance of supporting academics as well as students affected by conflict to avoid the loss of the current generation of academics and teachers as well as that of the future.

## Author Bio


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# Rebuilding higher education in Northern Syria

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## Abstract

This paper draws on a qualitative study, using both primary and secondary data generated from document analysis, interviews and focus group discussions with 24 academics and 14 students in three universities in Northern Syria to report on the situation of higher education sector in areas beyond the control of the Assad regime. The study reveals that these new universities have urgent needs such as reconstruction work on buildings and support for their academic and administrative staff and students to be able to operate meaningfully under the conditions of ongoing civil war.

## Key Words

Higher education  
 Syria  
 Conflict  
 Academic

## Introduction

The Syrian revolution began in 2011 and escalated into a protracted war, a high intensity internationalised conflict that ranks amongst the most destructive wars since the Second World War (Milton, 2019: 38). The continuing war has led to a devastating humanitarian crisis affecting all domains of the Syrian society, including education. It has had a particularly profound impact on higher education (HE) (Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014). The destruction, caused by the regime and its allies, has had an impact on the psychological, physical and societal needs of the whole of Syria, but particularly the Northern part of the country (Ferris and Kirisci, 2016).

HE has been particularly affected due to the destruction of infrastructure and buildings, internal and external displacement of HE staff and students, and the lack of government funding and accreditation. Additionally, the security situation in Northern Syria (NS) has deterred many young Syrians from enrolling or continuing their education in universities in areas controlled by the Assad regime. As a result, a large number of young Syrians who would have been at university prior to the conflict, has been deprived of access to HE. Apart from the detrimental effect on individuals, this has meant that all of Syria faces an enormous challenge to rebuild the HE infrastructure and educational services for the future.

HE was particularly affected in NS from 2011 until 2015 when the city of Idlib and its university were taken over by revolutionaries (Zedani, 2018). At the same time, an initiative emerged in the region, led by a group of academics who had fled from Assad regime-run universities. Those academics decided to establish the Free Aleppo University (FAU), as an

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alternative to University of Aleppo after fighting in Aleppo forced the university to disband and relocate in non-regime-controlled areas in 2015. This was followed by the opening of several private universities as a response to the need for HE in NS. These new universities have contributed to the provision of HE for young people in areas beyond the control of the regime. Aid agencies supported by the international community, have tended to focus on primary and secondary education in the region, leading to HE being neglected in terms of external funding, and international partnerships have not been sustained or developed to the desirable level. The priority has been to support investment in primary education as this investment would be perceived to bear higher rates of returns. It seems that HE is considered a luxury, rather than an essential component of the educational continuum or as a means to transform conditions in which refugees and conflict-affected populations live (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019: 2). Moreover, international support for young people to enrol in HE is lacking, because it is deemed a low priority for humanitarian aid interventions, which focus more on what they perceive as the 'basics' (Selby and Tadros, 2016: 11).

Previous research has only considered HE in Syria generally, without a focus on the specific case of NS. This article seeks to develop a clearer understanding of the HE situation in NS and draws on the perspectives of academics and students who are still working and studying at universities in the region. This study also draws on grey literature, due to the absence of reliable data and peer-reviewed literature on HE in the North of the country.

## Literature review

A European Commission 'Overview of the Higher Education System: Syria' report (2017) highlights some of the key issues relating to the funding of the HE sector, as well as analysing the structure, staff, quality assurance, mobility, internationalisation, and reforms ongoing in Syria at the time the report was written. Similarly, Al Hessian (2016) provides an overview of the Syrian educational system, include HE. This work reported information about the admission requirements for the vocational colleges and universities, which are principally based on the students' final national examination score taken in their final year of secondary school (level 12). Bacci

(2009) and Buckner (2013) both focus on the main problems faced by the HE sector before 2011, namely: too many students for too few universities, the lack of quality assurance mechanisms, and the failure of the Syrian state to successfully link an expanded HE to the employment market.

In two parallel reports commissioned by Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics), Dillabough *et al.* (2019a; 2019b) examine the state of Syrian HE pre- and post-2011. The former reveals problems associated with the security apparatus and ruling party intervention in university decision-making, a lack of transparency coupled with corruption and cronyism, a trend towards expansion at the expense of improved quality and a lack of employment opportunities for students. The latter reveals a post-2011 HE sector, suffering from fragmentation, heightened politicisation, human rights violations and political realignment.

While these reports provide comprehensive studies of universities in the whole of Syria both pre- and post-2011, Milton's (2019) study focuses on the impact of conflict on HE in regime-held territories, offering a comprehensive analysis of how the Syrian conflict has affected universities across the country. He found that HE institutions are also struggling to operate in a very challenging conflict-affected environment characterised by high levels of violence, mass displacement and intense politicisation but that the system had not collapsed. Many campuses continue to function albeit at a lower capacity than in pre-war Syria.

Al Oglia (2019) suggested that the universities in this part of the country face an uncertain future, estimating that 16,000 university students deal with increasing financial, academic and security challenges and their chances of completing university education appears to be slim. While this article focuses firmly on the current situation in NS, it reflects the experiences of other conflict-affected HE sectors in other countries. However, universities, if sustained and supported can play a significant role in the process of conflict response and the eventual creation of increased stability. Milton (2013) describes HE systems in Libya and Iraq as 'neglected pillars of recovery' and Milton and Barakat (2016) identify four important areas in which HE could make contributions: stabilisation and securitisation (improved security), reconstruction,



state-building and peacebuilding. Millican (2018) also documents the contribution that HE institutions have made to local communities and state infrastructure in peacebuilding and resistance in other conflict affected contexts.

## Methodology

This qualitative study aims to develop a critical understanding of the situation of HE in NS. The study uses a range of approaches, combining interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and document analysis, for the purposes of data triangulation and authentication. This approach enabled the researcher to verify and validate data through multiple sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 academics and 14 students who were still working or studying in three universities in NS. The sample was split across the three universities as follows: ten academics and six students from University 1; ten academics and six students from University 2; and four academics and two students from University 3. Specific codes were allocated to the interviewees, institutions and locations in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. Research participants' comments are identified by the reference codes summarised in Table 1.

The researcher faced some constraints at the data collection stage. The most challenging were finding academics and students who were willing to be

interviewed, and the volatile security situation on the ground. Some academics and students were unwilling to be interviewed due to lack of trust, as a result of previous negative experiences with similar research projects that had been undertaken by Syrian and international NGOs. They believed that such research projects were conducted in order to obtain funding, rather than for the benefit of the community. Others refused to collaborate, without providing any reason.

At the time of the fieldwork, due to clashes between opposing armed groups in parts of NS, 22 interviews and three FGDs were conducted in the Euphrates Shield area, which is generally considered safe, and a further 16 interviews in Idlib and the West of Aleppo Governorate when considered safe to do so, ten interviews were conducted remotely. The three FGDs were conducted between 15th and 24th April 2019, which included FGD 1 with six academics; FGD 2 with 23 male and female students; and FGD 3 with nine female students.

These FGDs were conducted in person in NS in the area under study, and constituted the main tool used to validate data initially collected from the grey literature. The data was thematically analysed, combined with deductive and inductive methods and the unforeseen themes that emerged in the data were also incorporated in presentation of findings. Once the interviews had been conducted and the data were labelled, the researcher collated the information using the codes assigned to the participants.

Type	Total	Reference code
Interviews University 1	16	Uni1 – Number of interviewee (1–16) – Male (m) or Female (f) – Academic (a) or Student (s)
Interviews University 2	16	Uni2 – Number of interviewee (1–16) – Male (m) or Female (f) – Academic (a) or Student (s)
Interviews University 3	6	Uni3 – Number of interviewee (1–6) – Male (m) or Female (f) – Academic (a) or Student (s)
Focus Group Discussion 1	6	FGD1
Focus Group Discussion 2	23	FGD2
Focus Group Discussion 3	9	FGD3

**Table 1: Reference codes of the research participants**

## Findings

The findings of this research are categorised under the three main themes that emerged from the data analysis process: challenges facing HE; the needs of HE; and its role in the reconstruction process in NS.

### Challenges facing higher education in Northern Syria

In conflict-affected contexts, HE faces numerous direct and/or indirect challenges. These can be grouped under the following key themes: physical destruction; population displacement (Milton and Barakat, 2016: 404); mental health; lack of international recognition; lack of financial support from the international community; the role of the armed groups; and the methodological challenges of conducting research in contexts of ongoing war. Table 2 provides further details.

### The needs of higher education

Many interviewees, both academics and students, focused on the need for funding to improve a wide range of aspects of infrastructure, while academics also placed a great deal of emphasis on issues related to the reputation of their institutions. These will be discussed below.

The universities in NS need financial support to repair and improve infrastructure, equip libraries and laboratories and pay salaries. The lack of funding reflects a lack of international support leaving them unable to cover their operating costs, which forces them to charge high student fees (Rajih, 2017). However, although there is financial support available to Syrian students in exile, there are no scholarships for those who have chosen to remain in Syria. Most of the universities in the North of the country also lack modern equipment, such as advanced laboratories, digital screens and projectors. Despite the availability of the internet, its coverage is limited, and it suffers from constant interruption. Lecture theatres are too small to accommodate the large numbers of students attending lectures with many forced to stand. There are no spaces or common rooms for recreation, rest or sport. Laboratories lack the materials and tools to conduct experiments (FGD 2, FGD 3, uni2-11-f-a, uni2-10-f-a, uni1-9-f-s, uni1-16-m-a, uni1-1-m-a, uni3-6-m-a).

Students see the availability of transport and adequate accommodation as the most important needs for them. They agree with academics that classrooms should be better equipped, new laboratories should be established and old ones should be repaired and upgraded. Furthermore, libraries, reading rooms, computer laboratories, and student and teacher accommodation should be provided. Female students indicated the need for private vehicles for female-only transport (FGDs 1, 2, 3).

The ongoing conflict in NS has led to the lack of accreditation of the universities there, which led to a distrust within the community in the ability of these universities to provide quality education. Therefore, these universities are seeking to obtain official accreditation of their institutions, and of the degrees that they provide. This remains conditional on the international recognition of the main opposition body in the area. Some academics who were interviewed reported that:

Accreditation enhances the potential of the university because it opens the way for the exchange of academic experiences as well as the exchange of research and students. (uni1-4-m-a)

Accreditation reinforces the confidence of the staff in their institution and the students [to] guarantee their future. (uni3-3-m-a)

The HE system in NS is fragmented. There is evidence that fragmentation constricts social trust in HE credentials (Altbach and De Wits, 2018; Milton and Barakat, 2016; Hinnebusch and Zintl, 2015). All academics in NS indicate their desire for the unification of the HE sector. One academic stated:

If the HE sector is not unified, we will not be able to cooperate with colleagues at other universities. (FGD 1)

The academics who were interviewed stressed that their universities needed to build relationships at the international level, which they believe would facilitate the question of accreditation, lessen their sense of isolation and enable them to keep up with the latest developments in their field. University administrations were largely ineffective in building these links, which were attributed by some to a lack of experience in developing such links, poor English language skills and the difficulty of obtaining passports and visas to allow travel to Western countries (FGD 1) where most academics and students interviewed hoped to travel.

Challenges	Details
Physical destruction	<p>The regime and its allies bombed university buildings (National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 2015; Khoudr and Bakour, 2018; Nour Al-Deen, 2019) and destroyed the infrastructure.</p> <p>A severe lack of infrastructure due to the lack of financial support and suitable buildings and expertise.</p>
Population displacement	<p>Tens of thousands of university students have fled from regime areas due to the fear of being arrested by the regime and conscripted into the army.</p> <p>Many university-age Syrians who are unable to access HE due to the conflict, 'roam the streets' (Milton and Barakat, 2015: 4), falling, for example, into petty crime and drug abuse.</p> <p>Displaced students make up approximately 50 percent of the student population in the universities in NS.</p> <p>Most of the IDPs have not adapted to the new communities.</p> <p>Frequent displacement has left many financially destitute and has had a detrimental impact on the enrollment of young people in universities.</p>
Mental health issues	<p>Many students suffer from psychological trauma, depression, and self-isolation.</p> <p>There has been a significant and alarming rise in drug abuse among young people of university age.</p>
International recognition	<p>Academics are unable to communicate with the outside world.</p> <p>Staff, students and graduates are unable to publish or pursue careers abroad (Dillabough <i>et al.</i>, 2019a: 53).</p> <p>The efforts of INGOs involved in supporting academics remain limited.</p>
Financial support	<p>There is not enough financial support.</p> <p>HE has been neglected or under-prioritised.</p> <p>Academics believe they are a group that has been largely forgotten by international humanitarian organisations.</p> <p>Donors still see HE as a luxury.</p> <p>There are neither international nor local programmes to support HE.</p>
Interference of armed groups	<p>Armed groups support some universities at the expense of others. This has led to rivalry between universities.</p> <p>All universities in Idlib governorate were faced with a stark choice: to accept an armed group's authority or to close (Hayek, 2019).</p>
Difficulties in conducting research	<p>There is no budget for research in the universities.</p> <p>There is a lack of necessary laboratories, libraries and equipment to conduct research.</p> <p>Publishers do not recognise universities and fail to support research.</p> <p>Lack of access to international journals.</p>

**Table 2: The challenges faced by HE in NS**

## Higher education and reconstruction

In his foreword to Dillabough *et al.* (2019a: 1), Lord Malloch-Brown, the former UN Deputy Secretary General and Chair of the International Crisis Group, states that rebuilding an autonomous effective system of HE in Syria will be a key part of the country's wider recovery and reconstruction process. The academics interviewed agreed on the important role of HE and their universities in the process of reconstruction in various fields. Below are some of their statements:

Universities have an important role in reconstruction through the study of projects related to realities of the situation and needs. (uni1-11-m-a)

Academics can make appropriate plans for the progress of the country and the restoration of what has been destroyed, in terms both of human beings and of the land itself. (uni2-10-f-a)

There are adequate human resources available, but we need funding, training, qualification and international expertise in order to play our part in the reconstruction process. (uni2-16-m-a)

HE also plays a major role in providing hope, promoting the values of peace and mutual understanding, which in turn contributes to the development of tolerance and peaceful coexistence and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017: 9). Syrians need to embrace these concepts after the conflict ends as the first step in building peace and reconstruction. Universities will be the starting point in this process. However, in order to move forward, rivalry between institutions must be avoided and a unified system will need to be agreed.

Based on the findings related to the challenges facing HE in NS and the needs emerging from this research, it is necessary to build an effective networking, communication and development strategy with international bodies to oversee and help transform the current provision of HE. This should help the sector work towards higher standards in teaching and research; to facilitate recognition and accreditation; and to provide essential financial support. The universities need to raise their media profiles and enhance their English language provision to develop links with international partners as well as enable access to academic resources. They should also aim to better understand the needs of the labour

market and provide their students with the skills and knowledge needed by employers. Scholarship programmes should be developed in response to the increased financial needs of the people who have been affected by conflict. NS universities need to build bridges of communication to come together under one umbrella and establish a formal overarching body that can supervise and manage HE in NS and provide a common conduit to the international community.

## Conclusion: Towards sustainable higher education in Northern Syria

The war in Syria is ongoing without a foreseeable end. In Northern Syria, as many other parts of the country, the safety and security of the population continue to be threatened by various forms of military attacks and grave human rights violations. However, this does not mean that the HE sector – or other sectors – should be abandoned or put on hold for reconstruction. Without these initiatives to relaunch universities, there would already have been a nine-year period without an HE provision at the time of writing this paper. Despite problems of accreditation and quality assurance, some HE is available for students in non-regime-controlled areas.

This research not only contributes to the scarce literature on HE in Syria post-2011, but also complements similar research elsewhere. HE in NS, in particular, suffers from considerable challenges, such as: the interference of armed groups; lack of national and international accreditation and recognition; lack of financial support and sustainability; and other challenges, associated with the violent conflict, such as safety and security of staff and students. An additional finding, not reported in previous studies, is the effect of the rivalry between universities in NS.

Attention should be paid to local expertise in the reconstruction process. As Altbach (2009: 25) points out, 'local universities are the only institutions that are able to focus attention on local needs.' Academics can participate in the reconstruction process and could empower the HE sector by harnessing local expertise to support future development. The universities in the North of the country should negotiate opportunities and scholarships to allow a number of their students to complete their degrees or pursue postgraduate studies in international universities.

This study underpins the role of HE in the post-conflict reconstruction process and emphasises that this sector needs to provide support in various areas if the sector is to survive. The unification of universities in non-regime-controlled areas and engaging with the international community are very important to preserve the HE sector. INGOs and donors should consider HE as an undeniable fundamental right of Syrians in the North, as an essential part of the humanitarian response and of future development efforts. Strategically, a working group combining Syrian academics in NS and in exile could help develop future HE programmes.

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# Supporting peacebuilding in Syria through universities: The role of cultural heritage

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## Abstract

Syria's population is made up of a diverse range of ethnicities and religions, as is its cultural heritage. Using a mixed research methodology of interviews and questionnaires to gather data from students and professors of Syrian universities, this article examines the possibility of teaching Syrian heritage within a university curriculum to support the promotion of civil peace in Syria, by foregrounding its diversity.

## Key Words

Universities

Syria

Peacebuilding

Cultural heritage

## Introduction

Syria has an impressive ethnic and religious diversity: Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Turkmen, Circassians, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Yazidis, but their common denominator is their Syrian identity (Al-Azm, 2017: 92). Given this diversity, it is possible that the common ground on which all Syrians can agree is a shared cultural heritage. As a result, we felt that this heritage could be taught as a topic in peace education at universities and based on similar global experiences, where there are examples that illustrate the contribution of cultural heritage in supporting civil peace in post-conflict situations (Milton, 2017). For example, community peace museums were established to promote a culture of peace and co-existence among all parties that were involved in conflict in different regions of Kenya (Somjee, 2017). Hence, this paper will suggest some ways that heritage education in Syrian universities might contribute to sustainable peacebuilding.

This paper draws on perspectives of academics and university students in Syrian universities, using a mixed methodology during 2018–2019 as the violent conflict was ongoing. The aim was to investigate heritage foci, in the form of historic Syrian sites and figures, which have the potential be utilised in building an inclusive curriculum which draws on aspects of the Syrian past to build a post-conflict future.

## Cultural heritage, higher education and peacebuilding

The conflict in Syria has been traumatic for all Syrians, and dramatically destabilised the region, reinforcing ethnic, sectarian, and class divisions

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(Al-Azm, 2017). Since 2011, the conflict has also adversely affected the provision of higher education (HE), exacerbating social divisions among students from various sectarian groups and ethnic minorities as well as economic and gender inequalities (Milton, 2019: 42). Achieving peace and reconciliation is essential in countries where civil wars have divided the society, but current discussions on how to create a space for peace and reconciliation in Syria do not sufficiently account for the potential of Syrian universities.

It has been argued that it is important 'to re-establish and enhance a sense of Syrian national identity as a principal way towards reconciliation and stability' (Al-Azm, 2017: 92). A Syrian identity based on shared cultural heritage can become a 'common denominator' in an otherwise fragmented cultural landscape (Al-Azm, 2017: 91-92). Investing in building this identity provides the potential to leave aside the racial, religious or tribal affinities, and builds on a common shared history. It has been suggested, for example, that sites such as Palmyra offer a 'neutral foundation on which to rebuild a fractured identity' (Lostal and Cunliffe, 2016: 254).

The explosion of armed violence and extremism, a culture of fear, polarisation and the abolition of the other in the Syrian crisis has led to the tragic neglect of the Syrian heritage. We believe it is possible to use heritage and cultural diversity as the basis for reconciliation and development that benefits everyone. This is possible through HE, despite the challenges faced by Syrian universities (Cara, 2019). It is recognised that universities are only one part of a larger nexus needed for heritage to support peacebuilding, which should also include other facets of society, such as community engagement and work with schools (Little and Shackel, 2016), but the aim of this research is to suggest ways through which heritage could contribute to peacebuilding through peace education in university settings (Oueijan, 2018).

The importance of Syrian heritage to Syrian identity has been noted (see Cunliffe *et al.*, 2012; Al-Azm, 2017), as has the way Syrian heritage can encourage a sense of belonging in local communities (Loosley, 2005). The experiences of the authors in Syrian universities, and supported by our findings presented here, is that heritage is not considered a significant area of teaching and learning in

Syrian HE although it might form a useful basis for reconstruction if introduced. It has the potential to emphasise unity, connections, and commonalities rather than divisions. Syrian cultural heritage has a diversity of objects, places, and historical figures which might be utilised to help shape renewed national identity (Somjee, 2017) in an equitable and just manner to promote a peaceful Syrian society. In other global contexts, it has been shown that cultural heritage might be utilised to produce new national narratives (Zetterstrom-Sharp, 2015) and universities are an appropriate and critical venue for their production, where approaches to peacebuilding through heritage can be evaluated (for example, Little and Shackel (2016) demonstrate a model whereby particular heritage sites can serve to promote conflict resolution).

In a university context, in order to utilise cultural heritage for the aim of building peaceful civil society, the first steps involve the design and provision of inclusive heritage curricula, which builds awareness of shared cultural heritage. Our project aimed to identify the aspects of Syrian heritage which might create a strong foundation for inclusion of heritage in the curriculum, looking particularly at historical figures and sites. The aim was also to build a Syrian society which uses its historical ethnic and sectarian diversity as the basis for an identity which takes pride in its contemporary diversity as a strength and thus promotes mutual respect and coexistence.

## Methodology

This research investigates the potential for universities to utilise diverse yet shared Syrian heritage to support the promotion of civil peace. The research was conducted during the ongoing crisis, between November 2018 and May 2019, in the North of Syria. The research was carried out by exiled Syrian academics in Turkey who could have access to the field only from their current location. However, one member of the team travelled into Syria to collect the data, which was collected from university students using a questionnaire and in-depth interviews with academics who share their perspectives about the importance of teaching cultural heritage in HE. The research aimed to identify a list of archaeological sites and historical figures which were important to a broad range of Syrians with different ethnic and religious identities. Cultural sites and historical figures were chosen

for this pilot study as they are recognisable to all Syrians even if they might not be familiar to the term 'heritage' (turath), which is a concept recently introduced in the region. The questionnaire was distributed in Al-Sham University and Free Aleppo University to 150 students but only 100 were returned (62 males and 38 females). The sample represented Arts and Humanities (5), Economic and Administration (11), Engineering (30), Law (23), Religious Studies (9), Education (6), Agriculture (2), and Nursing (14). Interviews were conducted with 9 academics (7 males and 2 females) in the same institutions representing Arts and Humanities (2), Economic and Administration (2), Engineering (1), Education (3) and Political science (1). The students surveyed represented different regions of Syria, as many did not originate from the location of the universities where they were attending. Of them, 44 percent were internally displaced, and the rest were more local to the region. These surveys and interviews allowed the researchers to identify the historical figures and sites that might be used to underpin a curriculum of shared heritage which could contribute to heal the political and ethnic/religious divisions in Syria.

Informed by previous studies, we designed a mixed research methodology to study Syrian university students and professors who represent an important constituency of the Syrian society and have the potential to shape social values through research, teaching and learning. We asked academics to reflect on the importance of cultural heritage in building civil peace, and ways of strengthening the role of universities through its inclusion in university courses. The student questionnaire was designed as multiple-choice so that a greater sample of students could be surveyed, while the academic interviews involved open-ended questions to gain a deeper understanding of their accumulated educational experience.

The most important challenges faced by the researchers were the security conditions, as well as the lack of awareness of some students and academics of the importance of this subject under the circumstances in which they lived in those areas. To overcome this problem, the researchers explained the reasons for undertaking study, in that it aimed to support peacebuilding within universities by examining the common cultural heritage in light of the ongoing war. When clarifying the aims of the

study and potential impact that the heritage can have, everyone understood the subject, and some were particularly enthusiastic about the aim of our research in promoting civil peace.

Researchers also faced the problem of lack of resources and literature on this subject because it is a new topic within Syria, where heritage studies were not an integral part of the curriculum before the conflict (See the example of the University of Aleppo, Munawar, 2019: 144). On a practical level, there was also some resistance to engaging with our research in Syria. Some academics did not initially want to be interviewed or recorded, and many students did not return the questionnaire (on such problems in research in Syrian university, see Dillabough *et al.*, 2018).

## Findings

Overall, there was good evidence that heritage was relevant to the research participants. We found that 63 percent of students had not received any formal education about Syrian cultural heritage, that there were no courses on these topics, while 37 percent answered that they had. In response to the question about the most important historical figures or sites, on a scale of 1–5, students answered a mean of 3.2 that heritage is of importance in building human values. Similarly, on a scale of 1–5, students responded with a mean of 4.02 that and heritage had an impact on supporting Syrian national identity and was influential on Syrian people's cultural values.

Specific historical figures who had an impact on Syrian history were chosen for those that could be considered unifying irrespective of their diverse social and cultural identities. The possible answers were as comprehensive and varied as possible, with the historical figures including ancient poets, politicians, military commanders, and doctors. As discussed below with regards to historical sites, the possible answers to the important historical figures were from across different regions throughout Syria and periods of the Syrian history.

Students ranked historical figures and sites, and those which received greatest approval from students were as below. These are examples of figures from different period, ethnicities and religions:

One of the most widely acclaimed personalities is Mohammed Al-Maghout, a writer and novelist who lived in the 20th century. Most of his literary work



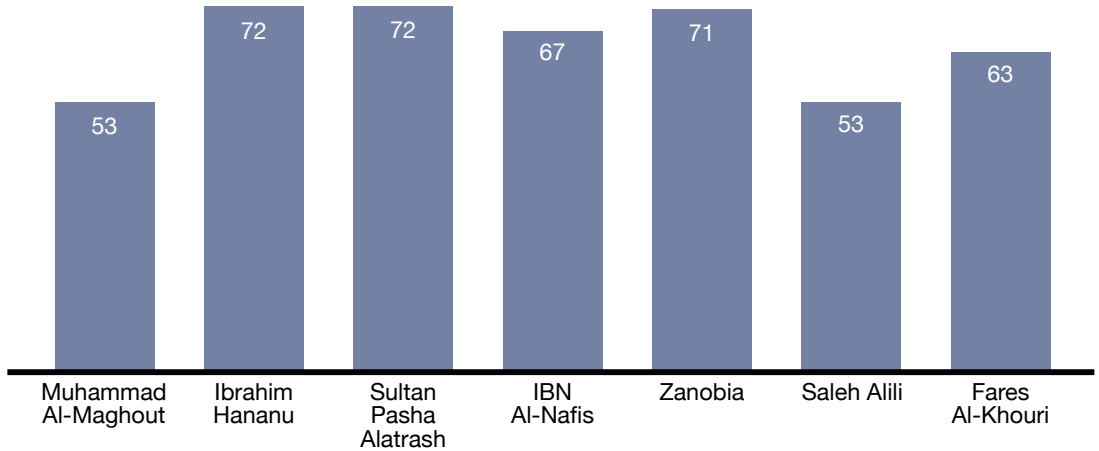


Figure 1. Students' ranking of historical figures and sites

has been transformed into plays that have gained great popularity among Syrians. Ibrahim Hanano, who also lived in the 20th century and had a role in confronting the French occupation, as did Nizar Qabbani, one of the most famous poets of Syria in the 20th century. For the ancient figures, Zenobia was renowned as queen of the Kingdom of Tadmur (Palmyra) as well as Ibn al-Nafis, a Syrian doctor who lived in the Islamic era and was the discoverer of the micro-circulation. This range shows that despite surveying students from different sects and regions, the students chose a wide range of historical figures from a variety of different sects which did not necessarily correspond to their own. It is therefore possible to say that the students did care about archaeological artifacts and the effects regardless of their belonging to a specific ethnic or religious

group, expressing their desire to live together in a diverse Syria. They chose personalities of different orientations, political views, literary traditions, social classes, and both ancient and modern.

We also note the existence of a consensus on the personalities who played a key role in political resistance against Western colonialism and a large percentage of the students surveyed agreed upon the historical figures who had a role in unifying Syrians such as, Zenobia, Khalid Bin Al Waleed, Salah Al Waleed Aldin, Yousef Al-Azamah, and Ibrahim Hanano. The same level of agreement also applies to the historic sites. The places surveyed, dating from eras ranging from prehistory to early Christianity and the Islamic era, belonged to different sects and ethnicities. Below are the most important places that were selected by the students:

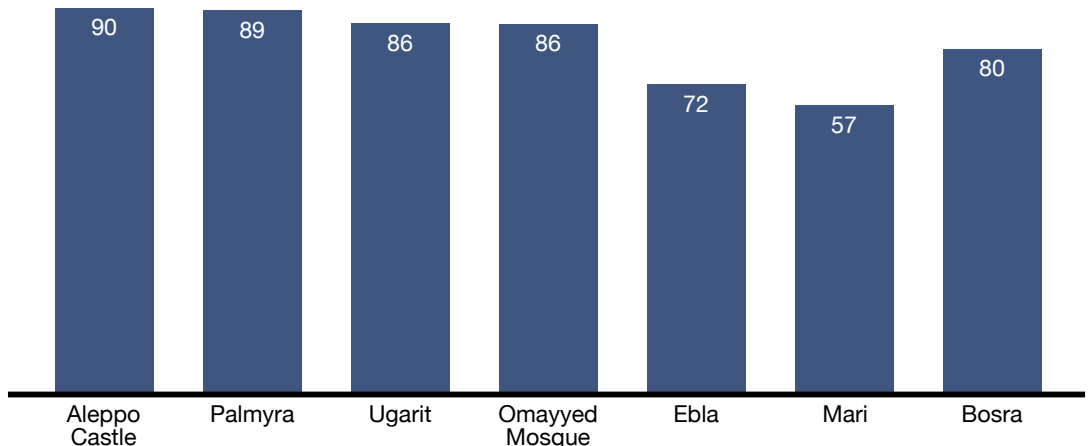


Figure 2. Participants' ranking of most important heritage sites

The importance of the citadel of Aleppo is evident for the students, but it is notable that many other places not in the same region were also considered important. For example, Palmyra, Mari, Ebla and Bosra, all dating to pre-Islamic times, as well as Islamic monuments such as Umayyad Mosques in Damascus and Aleppo were indicated by many students as important heritage sites. This demonstrates that the students did not have a preference in their conception of Syrian heritage between modern and ancient, Islamic or non-Islamic, but they had pride in a diversity of sites within Syria as a whole.

In the questionnaire, students were asked what characters they wanted to be in a cultural heritage curriculum. They suggested the names of some of the personalities and places which they wish to see included in the university's cultural heritage curricula, such as Shukri al-Quwatli, Zuluabiya and Yusuf al-Azmah, as well as places, such as the ruins of Aleppo and Ebla.

Interestingly, our research found that there was a relative lack of awareness among academics about Syrian common heritage. However, they were open

to teaching heritage through their curriculum. They also emphasised the potential role of heritage in building civil peace through celebration of common historical images which were not based on ethnic or religious backgrounds. Where all academics agreed that there were important Muslim figures, Christian figures such as, Fares al-Khoury Christian were also popular. They also agreed on figures such as Zenobia; the common factor for figures seems to be that they are historical examples of Syrian power, independence, and resistance to external rule.

Given the geographical and cultural diversity of heritage which Syrians identified as meaningful in this study, we believe there is the potential for heritage education to form a collective basis of promoting civil peace. Despite the destruction of social fabrics in Syria due to the civil war, Syrians still hold a sense of pride in a wide range of historical sites and historical figures that belonged to different sects and nationalities. We can enhance this spirit among students through the heritage curricula to reclaim a common national identity among diverse groups of Syrians.



Figure 3. Locations of important heritage sites

Historical figures are an important part of people's culture. As is shown by the questionnaire results, Syrians are proud of the personalities from different sects and affiliations because they represent a common cultural heritage that reveals coexistence and harmony in the Syrian society. The figures perceived to be most important to Syrian academics and students are those who had a prominent role in bringing the Syrians together or had a role in resisting colonialism, such as Zenobia, Khalid ibn al-Walid, Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi and Pasha al-Atrash. At the same time, universities have a role to play in supporting the value system in which the cultural heritage can play an important role.

The Syrian experiment relied on the selection of archaeological sites regardless of ethnic, religious or regional affiliation. In Syria, cultural heritage has not always been viewed as positive by all people, due to its imperialistic use by European archaeologists and its use in service of the regime (Gillot, 2010: 9). Our research shows that there is potential in utilising cultural heritage in a positive way through promotion of common Syrian figures and historical sites.

## Conclusion

This research shows that Syrian cultural heritage is important to academics and students and is key to their identity and belonging. By assuring students and academics that cultural heritage sites and historical figures represent the heritage of Syria as a whole, we also suggest that it is important to pay attention to the dissemination of knowledge of Syrian cultural heritage sites and shared memory. University curricula could enable this by utilising shared heritage to contribute to the creation of a common national identity among university students, which could eventually help contribute to the consolidation of civil peace in Syria. The importance of teaching cultural heritage has potential to rebuild a post-war society, by focusing on heritage which promotes narratives of tolerance and shared past, which can also enable the rebuilding of trust in the society.

Heritage is a source of identity and social cohesion in societies facing confusing transformations and instability, and teaching cultural heritage has the potential to promote an open, inclusive and pluralistic society by contributing to a sense of shared citizenship and collective identity.

Heritage and inclusive education can also help lay the foundations for the development of a vibrant society. The inclusion of heritage in university education also looks towards the future, in building a generation that is aware of its heritage, and thus could contribute to preservation of cultural and historical identity for future generations. In order to do this, it is crucial to draw on online resources and bibliographies, or via workshops on Syria's cultural heritage, to enable academics to include relevant teaching materials on cultural heritage. Cooperation with international universities with expertise in this field can benefit Syrian universities to establish heritage education as an important discipline for research, teaching and learning. This small-scale research reveals some encouraging results to this direction. There is, however, need for much broader research around how heritage education in universities could be advanced and promoted as a means to peacebuilding in post-war Syria.

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# Agricultural knowledge from academy to farming communities: The role of higher education in enhancing food security in Syria



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## Abstract

The dynamics of the Syrian conflict present a complex set of challenges that led to considering more than 10.5 million people food insecure and in need of urgent agricultural and livelihood assistance.

This article investigates the role of higher education (HE) in food security. It considers how universities, graduates, and appropriate curriculum and research engagement can address challenges and provide innovative solutions in Syria.

## Key Words

Agriculture

Syria

Food security

Higher education

## Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines food security as a 'situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 2002). The Syrian War, which began as a civil uprising in 2011, quickly transformed into one of the world's most pressing humanitarian disasters, with food security emerging as a major issue. As well as causing the displacement of 13 million people (8 million of them internally displaced), the conflict has been detrimental to both the economy and the environment, and thus to agricultural production (Abdo, 2018; Kelley *et al.*, 2015; Lagi *et al.*, 2011). Kelley *et al.*'s (2015) analyses suggested that the severe 2007–2010 drought in Syria, in part caused by human practices and resulting in the migration of a significant number of rural people to cities, was a contributory factor to the war, and found that anthropogenic climate change will make such droughts more than twice as likely to occur in the future.

Moreover, due to the ongoing conflict, the country's education system has been severely damaged, with disastrous effects on the production and dissemination of knowledge. Higher education (HE) has been no exception: university buildings, infrastructure, resources, and research centres have been targeted for violent attacks, and academics, staff and students subjected to violence and intimidation (Cara, 2019; Millican *et al.*, 2019;

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Milton, 2019; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014). Tens of thousands of university students have had no choice but to end their academic studies for a variety of pressing reasons, including security risks associated with travelling to their universities, injury, escape from military service, and internal displacement. In addition, thousands of academics, veterinary practitioners and agricultural engineers, including agricultural extension staff, have had to flee violence and threats to their lives. Consequently, a considerable detrimental impact on agriculture and food security, with the potential loss of agricultural knowledge and expertise, has been observed in the country.

Prior to the conflict, agriculture was the most important sector of the Syrian economy. In 2001, it made up as much as 27 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (World Bank, 2019; FAO, 2017; FAO and WFP, 2010). Despite being in a period of sustained crisis since 2011, agriculture is still considered an important part of Syria's economy (26 percent of GDP) and critical for the self-sufficiency of more than 75 percent of households who grow their own food for consumption. However, Syria is a currently a country where more than 10.5 million people are considered in need of urgent life-saving and life-sustaining food, and agricultural and livelihood assistance (FAO, 2019; OCHA, 2018; OCHA, 2017; FAO, 2017). Recently, many factors, including loss of expertise, forced internal and external displacement, damage to the agricultural infrastructure and collapsed extension services have seriously affected food security (Boden *et al.*, 2019).

Moreover, the conflict has seen numerous instances where food has been weaponised during sieges to break the population's resolve. In 2016, for example, attention was focused on the besieged town of Madaya and how hunger had been deliberately provoked there. Yet, Madaya was one of several Syrian cities that had been under siege for months where their populations were also dying of hunger (Zareceansky, 2016). Al Shimale (2016) reported on how food became instrumentalised as a weapon of war during the siege of Aleppo where more than 300,000 people were encircled by the forces of the Assad regime. The besieged residents were often unable to obtain food and were barely eating one meal a day. One of the respondents in Al Shimale report said, 'We were not able to get food every day and were barely eating one meal a day. We had six pieces of bread for the whole family every two days'.

Human Appeal (2018), one of the leading UK charities providing humanitarian aid in Syria, has reported how the sieges of places like Aleppo, Homs and Eastern Ghouta in Syria have caused food insecurity and malnutrition to spiral out of control. Their report details how forced starvation on a population can have devastating effects in the short, medium and long term and how it disproportionately harms vulnerable people such as children, the elderly and pregnant and lactating women, and those with disabilities. Syria's case is particularly heart breaking as the uprising, which began as mass protests against an authoritarian regime, has subsequently developed into a complex internationalised civil war that threatens to destroy its local food systems irreversibly. Consequently, more than 6.5 million people are currently food insecure and a further 4 million people are at risk of becoming acutely food insecure (FAO, 2017; Zurayk, 2013).

The dynamics of Syrian conflict present a complex set of challenges for educational development. Existing models of education are inappropriate, inadequate and/or inaccessible to some communities in conflict-affected contexts (Cara, 2018; Abdullateef *et al.*, 2018). A nation's knowledge is one of its strategic domains that needs to be constantly developed and renewed. Agricultural systems could be enhanced when universities produce and share agricultural knowledge; the extension role of universities is realised; and there is a good mechanism to promote farmers' learning (Chikaire *et al.*, 2015). As noted above, since 2011 tens of thousands of university staff and students have had to stop or suspend their studies for a variety of reasons. In addition, those who do graduate have limited opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge through professional practice. The cumulative effect is that Syria's working population is rapidly deskilling.

At present, agricultural students and graduates in Syria face significant barriers to skills development, leaving them unable to support farmers with technical solutions and extension. The consequences of this damage to the education sector have been particularly profound for the agricultural sector. This article investigates the role of HE in food security in Syria. It looks at food availability; food access; changes in farming practices; knowledge exchange and the place of agricultural extension in knowledge transfer.

It considers how universities, graduates and appropriate curriculum and research engagement can address challenges and provide innovative solutions to food insecurity and as such has relevance for similar contexts in other parts of the world.



**Figure 1.** Example of agricultural practices dissemination to farmers via extension staff pre-2011. A: Knowledge transfer through delivering seminars and workshops; B: Practice application by farmers; and C: Follow up and evaluation.

## Methodology

This research was carried out as part of the Cara Syria Programme in 2019. The programme aimed to enhance research skills of Syrian academics in exile on topics related to their areas of interest. The training courses on research skills were helpful in designing and carrying out this research. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from three regions (Al-Atareb, Azaz-Jarablus and Kafarnubul) in North West Syria (Table 1). The selected locations have received the highest levels of internally displaced persons (IDPs), including farmers from other regions of Syria affected by violence.

In Syria, as in other countries, universities and research centres are considered the main sites of knowledge resources and knowledge production. Agricultural and veterinary scientists in HE carry out experiments, obtain results and offer solutions for the changes and challenges facing farmers. Agricultural engineers, as extension staff, transfer this knowledge to farmers in a number of different ways, including through workshops, lectures and fieldwork. Using a qualitative methodological approach, our research investigates the knowledge pathway from HE, including universities and research centres, to farmers and agriculturalists via extension services and staff (Figure 2) to understand the challenges and the impact of the following main factors of the food security in Syria, in particular:

- Farmers' behaviour and experiences and subsequent changes in the farming systems;
- Agricultural extension services including extension infrastructure and practitioners;
- HE's role, including curriculum and research.

## Food Security

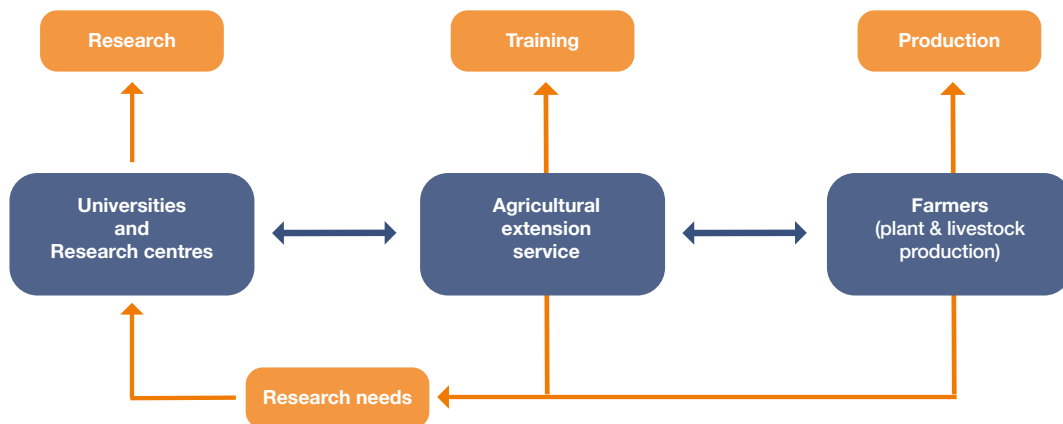


Figure 2.

**Agriculture knowledge pathway from universities to the farmers via agricultural extension staff to enhance food security in Syria.**

In carrying out this research, a literature review was conducted using available reports and previous studies to formulate the main themes and questions for the questionnaire. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected via diagnostic questionnaires and focus groups. Drawing on the literature review, as well as the research team's own knowledge of the food security situation, a questionnaire was developed and tested through a pilot survey with 15 respondents at each research site. This enabled the research team to collect participants' feedback for further improvement of the research instruments. The final version was then distributed to local facilitators. Three online capacity building workshops were organised (40 participants in total) to ensure that facilitators had the required skills to undertake the interviews and fully grasped the research aim and questions, the contents of the questionnaire and research ethics. In addition, the authors developed a list of focus group discussion (FGD) questions for detailed information and clear understanding of the main issues in the research.

### Focus group discussions (FGDs)

A total of six FGDs were conducted, two at each location – one with extension staff and one with internally displaced and host farmers (Table 1).

In total, 40 agriculture engineers and veterinary practitioners with at least 5 years' experience of working in agricultural extension services, and 33 internally displaced and host farmers participated in the FGDs. The FGDs provided deep insights into the impact the conflict-related problems facing HE has had on agricultural practices. The discussions focused on lessons learned, farmers' success stories and extension challenges and suggestions.

### Interview-based questionnaires

A questionnaire was used to capture community level feedback from host and internally displaced farmers. The questionnaire comprised informative and open questions regarding farmers' social and economic circumstances; food production and availability; agriculture extension services; graduates' experience; curriculum; and research impact on food security pre- and post-2011. In total, 301 individual interviews with 119 internally displaced farmers and 183 host farmers were carried out in 50 villages in the studied areas (Table 1). In addition, a WhatsApp group was established to facilitate the communication between the researcher and the data collection team for immediate technical support and feedback.



Research area	Focus group discussions			Questionnaire – individual interviews			
	FGDs	Farmers	Ext. staff*	Villages	Interviews	ID farmer	Host farmer
Idlib	2	13	11	15	90	44	46
Al-Atareb	2	10	14	20	97	34	63
Azaz-Jarablus	2	10	15	15	114	41	73
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>182</b>

\* Extension staff are agronomists and veterinarians with at least 5 years of experience of working in agricultural extension services.

**Table 1.**

**Research area and sample size used for each tool of data collection resources via focus group discussions and individual-based interviews.**

## The current food crisis in Syria

Syria was an exception in the Arab world with regard to food security. Whereas all other Arab countries were classified as having a food deficit, Syria was considered a food self-sufficient country (Haddad *et al.*, 2011; Shideed, 2008). However, due to the war and the resulting displacement of populations, food insecurity is now considered one of the most critical challenges facing the Syrian people. The results obtained in our research showed that 46.8 percent of respondents from both host communities and IDPs depend on agriculture and 33.5 percent depend on livestock production as their main income source. This confirms the fact that the majority of the Syrian population is located in rural communities. Thus, agriculture is not only a means of subsistence but, equally importantly, also a source of income for most Syrians (Schmidhuber and Tubiello, 2007).

Our research found that 80 percent of respondents secured their own food requirements from their agricultural activities. In 2018, the FAO reported that more than 75 percent of Syrians were self-reliant in food production. However, this research highlighted that food availability was significantly reduced for both plant and livestock production. This was a result of the lack of extension services, low quality agricultural input, high production costs, and

reduced cultivated and irrigated fields. For example, irrigated fields have decreased from a pre-crisis total of 19.8 percent cultivated fields to less than 10 percent since 2011.

In addition, vulnerable communities have become unable to afford their essential food needs. Low food purchasing ability was recorded for main food items such as bread (44.9 percent), vegetables (23.2 percent), eggs (13.9 percent), and red meat (27.2 percent). Thus, even if food was available in local markets, communities are not able to purchase it. Moreover, livestock numbers had decreased for a majority, with 58 percent of sheep farmers and 65.5 percent of cattle farmers stating there had been a drop. Agriculture inputs availability reduced from 79.6 percent pre-crisis, to 47.2 percent since 2011. These results could reflect not only the long-standing conflict, but also the sudden desperate straits of vulnerable populations. If food prices remain high, there is likely to be persistent and increasing Syrian social disruption.

### **Agronomist and veterinary practitioners experience pre- and post-2011**

HE is generally regarded as a place for teaching and learning about theoretical knowledge in the field. This research showed that the experience of agronomists and veterinary practitioners needs to be continuously

updated. Although their experience was described as very good to good before the crisis with only 40 percent of respondents, currently, it is reduced to good to medium with about 30 percent of the respondents. This result seems to be a negative consequence of the destruction of the HE system and the migration of skilled academics, agronomists and veterinary scientists. FGD2-extension staff discussed this issue and highlighted the weak skills of new graduates, noting that this was one of the challenges faced by farmers:

Weak experience limited to theoretical knowledge has led farmers to be less confident with the new graduates.

In addition, FGD1-extension staff reported that:

There are engineers, but the link between academic study and reality on the ground [practical knowledge] is very weak and theoretical knowledge gained during the study at a university only allows students to graduate without [any practical] knowledge in field production.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to identify the knowledge and skills gaps and to provide innovative solutions for capacity building. As expertise is lost in Syria through the migration of academics and practitioners, solutions are required to improve knowledge mobilisation and strengthen collaborations with experts in the wider global community. However, this requires rebuilding trust and expertise in the Syrian agriculture and food sectors, and identifying existing knowledge.

### The role of universities and research centres pre- and post-2011

One of critical effects of the ongoing war has been the reduction of educational quality, which has led to the deskilling of new university graduates. Our research showed that the quality of HE pre-crisis was described as good by 72 percent of farmers and as weak by 50 percent of farmers currently. The role of the curriculum in enhancing food security in Syria was described as good before the crisis and dropped considerably after eight years of ongoing conflict. HE is considered a main source of knowledge and development for agricultural extension staff. FGD1-extension staff clarified the role of HE in these terms:

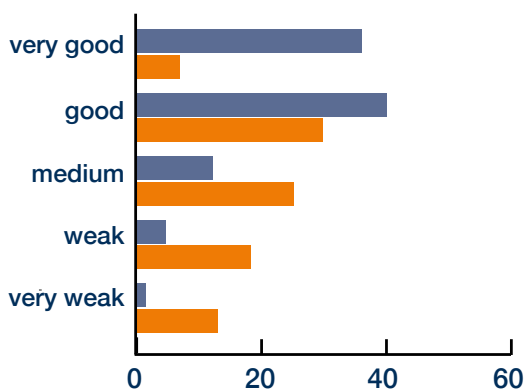
HE can play an effective role by carrying out research relevant to improving agricultural activities in our area.

The FGD3-farmers highlighted some limitations and challenges:

The role of HE in improving food production is very weak because of the lack of laboratories and the opportunities for conducting physical and chemical analyses of soil and crops.

The lack of practical aspects in Syrian HE, even before the crisis, has been discussed in several previous studies. CARA (2019) and Abdullateef and Parkinson (2017) found that prior to the crisis, Syrian HE was characterised as theoretically oriented, with a concomitant lack of practical expertise relating to the needs of communities and industry.

#### Agronomist experience



#### Veterinary experience

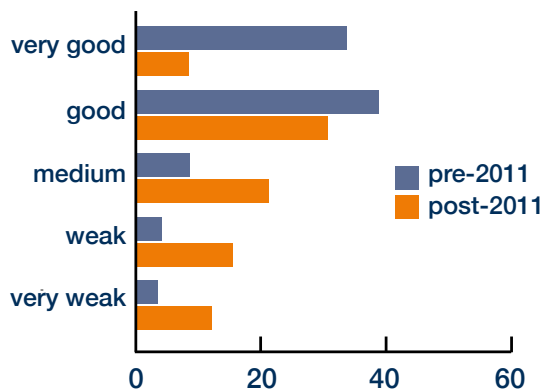
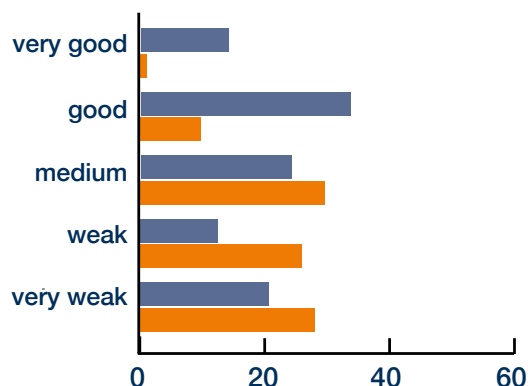


Figure 3. Agronomist and veterinary experience pre- and post-2011 from point of view of farmers and livestock breeders.

### Curriculum



### Research

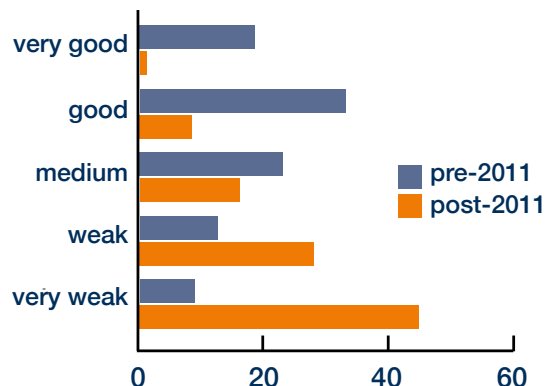


Figure 4. Curriculum and research role evaluation pre- and post-2011 from the point of view the farmers and livestock breeders.

To improve the role of universities, FGD-1 extension staff suggested that:

HE can play an active role by conducting research specific to a region and its agricultural problems through providing seminars to introduce cultivation methods and to alert farmers...to be aware of diseases and treatment methods.

The respondents in the research identified the following as the most reliable current agricultural sources: expert farmers who have previous experience in plant and livestock production; agricultural engineers and veterinary practitioners who have experience gained throughout their work; practical field days held by local organisations; and viewing agricultural extension programmes delivered by social media. These were also mentioned by FGD1-farmers, FGD2-extension staff and FGD3-extension staff.

### Agricultural extension services pre- and post-2011

In Syria, the agricultural extension system forms the main chain of knowledge transfer between universities, research centres and the farming system. Our research showed a weak extension service both pre- and post-2011. Only 54 percent and 48 percent of respondents received any kind of extension services pre- and post-crisis, respectively. Crop rotation was used as an indicator of the impact of an effective agricultural extension. The results showed that crop rotation in the farming system decreased to 45.8 percent of total farms. Only a few framers were able to attend to some extension activities as the FGD2-farmers reported that:

[We] have gained experience and knowledge of livestock and plant diseases and learned ways to treat them through the seminars, agricultural exhibitions and symposiums held in the region.

### Exhibitions and symposiums

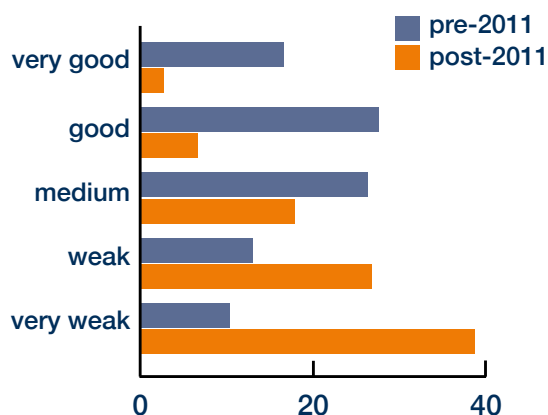


Figure 5. Agricultural exhibitions and symposiums role evaluation pre- and post-2011 from the point of view of farmers and livestock breeders.

There is a lack of agricultural extension and a lack of institutional work. Some local organisations provide workshops and training courses, but these are available only to their members. There is also a lack of specialized extension centres. (FGD1-farmers)

On the other hand, weak local governance structures and extension services, especially in opposition-controlled areas, were considered as the main challenges impacting food production. UKaid (2018) highlighted that at national level, statistics and updated data are often lacking. FGD3-extension staff reported that:

Currently, there is no accurate resource for agricultural data for both plant and livestock production.

### Stories of successful agricultural knowledge exchange

Agricultural knowledge exchange between host communities and IDPs in some cases introduced new production practices. In spite of the negative effect of farmer displacement, there were encouraging stories of knowledge exchange for successful food production. FGD2-extension staff highlighted some of these practices such as ‘introducing new crops to host areas, introducing new agricultural methods like plastic tunnels and using seedlings production in trays for early production’ and ‘introducing Najdi sheep by displaced farmers into the host community in Azaz-Jرابلس (FGD1-farmers). It was also reported that IDPs introduced medicinal and aromatic plants for cultivation in the host areas (e.g. thyme and safflower plants)’. There were also benefits to displaced farmers from the host community. As FGD2-extension staff noted:

Internally displaced farmers from Dair-Azzour have learned the production of pistachio seedlings from host farmers in Jarablus.

Internally displaced farmers learned from host farmers new methods/practices to cultivate cumin plants e.g. use 40 kg instead 20 kg cumin seeds per hectare, and tillage the soil two times instead of one time to improve seed germination and growing and of course, the yield at harvest time.

Although vegetable cultivation is common agricultural knowledge among Syrian farmers in all regions, the internally displaced farmers brought with them additional cultivation practices to improve the production per unit area.

We learned from the displaced framers how to cultivate some vegetables such as cauliflower and cabbage that were not well known to us, and how to use soluble fertilisers (FGD3-farmers).

However, despite positive examples coming out of the movement of people to different parts of the country, the FGD3-extension-staff also pointed out some negative effects of displacement on agriculture, for example:

Introducing... fruit tree species which are not suitable for host areas such as, almonds, cherry and apricot to host farmers in Maret-alnumaan. [Also] introducing some dwarf species of olive trees imported from Spain, which led to the spread of new pests in the host regions.

FGD3-farmers highlighted that:

Displaced farmers contributed to excluding cultivation of some crops that were previously cultivated in host areas, and replacing them with new crops, especially medicine and ornamental plants.



Figure 6. Agricultural knowledge exchange between host and internally displaced farmers

## Conclusion

The protracted war in Syria is a humanitarian disaster for all Syrians, not least in its impact on agriculture and food security. This study concluded that alternative systems of knowledge transfer should be developed that make best use of the resources HE has to offer using new curriculum approaches that reflect the rapid development of agricultural research. This will help build the capacity of farmers in conflict areas and could be done through distance learning, social media, student field days, orientation seminars and graduation projects.

Research is needed into the rehabilitation of the agricultural sector focusing on the long-term transition from humanitarian interventions to development initiatives. Capacity building programmes to develop the efficiency of agricultural engineers and veterinary practitioners should aim at enhancing existing skills and providing additional up-to-date scientific expertise. The agricultural knowledge infrastructure of HE also needs to be improved through the introduction of new teaching methods and modern theoretical and practical approaches to improve the quality of curriculum and scientific research. Building a network that connects Syrian academics and researchers with international universities and research institutions will bring together local knowledge with international expertise to support research that meets the needs of the current Syrian context.

## Author Bios

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# The effect of the Syrian crisis on electricity supply and the household life in North-West Syria: a university-based study


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## Abstract

This study analysed the current situation of access to electricity in Northwestern Syria. Using a household survey [N=136], a questionnaire with generator owners [N=8] and interviews with academics [N=2] in Idlib and Azaz regions of Syria, the research revealed that electricity generation has become nearly entirely dependent on the private sector and the expenditure on electricity increased by 82 percent, limiting the availability of electricity mostly between 2 and 10 hours per day.

## Key Words

Conflict

Energy crisis

Electricity

Syria

## What is the problem?

Entering the ninth year of violent conflict, the scale, severity, and complexity of needs of basic services across Syria remain overwhelming (United Nations, 2019). This is the result of continued hostilities in local areas, new and protracted displacement, increased self-organised returns of formerly displaced people and the sustained erosion of communities' resilience during the protracted crisis. Across Syria, an estimated 11.7 million people are in need of various forms of humanitarian assistance, with certain population groups facing particularly high levels of vulnerability. Whilst there has been a reduction in violence in many parts of the country over the past year, conflict continues to be the principal driver of humanitarian needs, with the civilian population in many parts of the country exposed to significant protection risks which threaten life, dignity and wellbeing on a daily basis. Over 50 percent of the infrastructure in Syria is not operational, often because it has been destroyed as a result of hostilities (United Nations, 2018). Also, electricity production, transmission and distribution have been heavily affected by ongoing hostilities, leaving most of Syria's electricity infrastructure non-operational. Therefore, almost 70 percent of the population in Syria lacks sustained access to electricity which has had negative impacts on people's lives and the economy. UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) generally focus on providing basic needs, namely health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), non-food items (NFIs), shelter and protection, but energy has not been included in

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their humanitarian activities. Without stable access to power, institutions such as hospitals depend on diesel generators only, which makes them vulnerable to outages and price gouging. Patients frequently suffer and die when electricity supply fails.

When it is available, electricity supply is limited to only a few hours during the day and is expensive in relation to the average income of the family. Given that most people in Syria have severe electricity needs, providing solutions, such as large solar power plants, which take advantage of the abundance in irradiation, would offer good alternatives to restore power to Syrian cities, such as Aleppo. Also, dispersed solar generation systems could add resilience to an energy system that has been severely damaged by war and will remain at risk of violent attack (Muth, 2016). Although various technical solutions exist, there is a lack of comprehensive research to identify the current gap between production and needs of electricity in Syria. So far, Syrian academics have not conducted any studies related to the issue of the need for electric energy, nor of the status of the electrical network in order to identify alternative solutions for Syrian families in light of the crisis.

This article presents an analysis of the current state of electricity supply in two regions in Northwest Syria. It includes an empirical survey of electricity consumption and production under the current crisis situation. Overall, the study identifies gaps between the two. The study was designed and implemented by a team of researchers who took part in an academic support program organised the Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics) between November 2018 and July 2019. The empirical survey was undertaken in the regions of Idlib and Azaz throughout February and March 2019 by student researchers from collaborating universities (Idlib University and Sham University). It makes the case for the importance of addressing and quantifying energy as an important human need in the current and reconstruction periods. It also illustrates the contribution that university academics and their students might make, as local and informed researchers, to assessing these needs and recommending or designing solutions through research and innovations to address the problem of electricity shortages using renewable sources. Besides, they can also make the subject of renewable energies and its applications an essential part of the curriculum.

## Previous studies

There are a number of published studies related to the crisis in Syria, which focus on the various needs of Syrian citizens. However, none of these focus on electricity needs. Research shows destructive effects of the crisis on the electricity sector, significantly reducing power generation, which pre-crisis met over 75 percent of the country's essential everyday social and economic needs (Sputnik News, 2017).

The latest available figures indicate, however, that the Syrian government continued to export electricity to Lebanon (Sputnik News, 2017). The power level of electricity exported varied between 100 and 120MW in 2016, depending on the functioning of the network running from the Syrian Samarian station to the Lebanese Direnboh station (Sputnik News, 2017). Furthermore, the Ministry website noted that it continued to issue electricity bills to people who lived in areas abandoned since the start of the crisis ranging in value between 500,000 and 800,000 Syrian pounds (1000 to 1600 US dollars, 1 USD = 500 SYP) (Hal.net, 2018). This indicates the problem of electricity costs for returnees, who were forced to pay bills which have accumulated over years in spite of no electricity consumption and ongoing fighting in the region causing power outages during their absence.

Apart from these figures, the literature review did not provide any more statistics on the quantity of electricity required by Syria nor on the number of power stations out of order as a result of the war. Hence, there is a lack of evidence about the required and available amounts of electricity at present. With regards to potential future developments, it was indicated that Turkey and, following the return of stability, Syria, would be the route to Europe for projects connecting electrical networks with the Gulf States. Additionally, a decline in oil prices in the world market would not affect the set-up of solar power plants in the Gulf countries which contain vast uninvested areas and abundant solar energy throughout the year. Thus, that also indicates the benefits of connected networks between Arab countries and Turkey (GCCIA, 2016).

Hasan (2012) found that the application of energy-saving measures at the individual household level in Iraq could result in a reduction of 63.4 percent in annual electricity consumption from

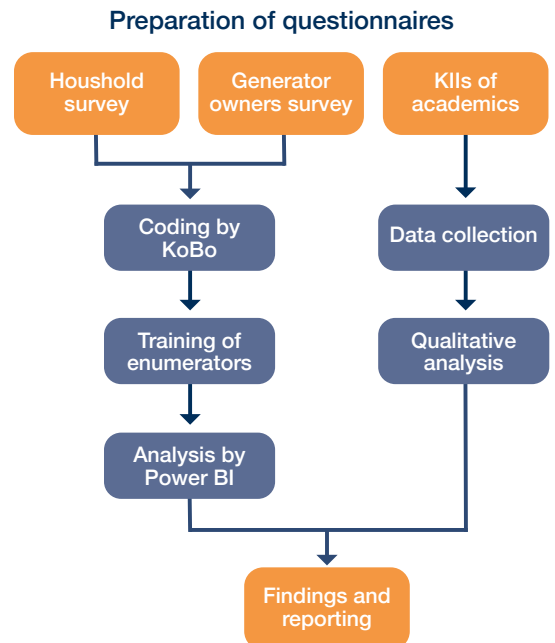


71,500 kWh to 26,167 kWh. Although the study was conducted in Iraq, it used this example to estimate a comparable reduction of electricity consumption in households in Damascus, Syria. Another study indicated the geographical distribution of solar radiation across Syrian regions and their ranges over different periods (Tarboush, 1969). This study, despite the timeframe (1960) Hamoudi (2009) discussed a number of solar power generation related topics, which included solar panels and their angles of deflection looking at the electrical power that can be generated from solar energy. Other studies addressed the cost of solar-powered electricity production and compared it to the cost of other renewable energies, and showed the superiority of solar energy to produce electricity over the rest of the renewable energy sources in terms of abundance and efficiency (Kost *et al.*, 2018). Further studies discussed specific issues such as calculating the cost of setting up a solar-powered farm in remote areas (Mohammed and Jasem, 2012), which detail the solar power supplies and tools needed to feed such a farm.

## Methodology

This study was designed to gather information about the situation of electricity supply, needs and levels of consumption in Idlib and Azaz regions in Northwestern Syria by using questionnaires and interviews. Within this context, three relevant groups of actors were identified and analysed as shown in figure 1. The first group consisted of private households which represent the demand side of energy. For this group, a questionnaire survey was conducted comprising 51 questions to explore the energy use in the target communities, the availability of electrical equipment and to determine the amount of energy consumption and related costs. It addressed a sample size of 120 households, which was determined to be sufficient for quantifying the daily needs and consumption of electricity in households within the target region. The second group consisted of generator owners, which represents the supply side of energy. For this group, another questionnaire survey comprising 10 questions was conducted to explore available electricity supply, determine the amount of electricity produced, the duration of service provision and challenges. It addressed a sample size of eight generator owners which was seen to be sufficient for getting a picture of the supply side within the

target region. Finally, the third group consisted of academics within the study area who worked in the situation of mostly non-operational electricity infrastructure. To this end, key informant interviews (KIIs) with academics of two universities within the target region were conducted in order to look at links between their research or projects related to this study and how they could address the lack of electricity by carrying out or intensifying research on renewable energy. For the questionnaires, the programme 'KoBo Toolbox', which is a free open source tool to collect data using mobile devices without a network connection, was used to collect the data. Furthermore, Microsoft 'Power BI' was employed for data analysis and to display results in charts and tables.



**Figure 1.**  
Flow chart of the research

For the first group (i.e. households) the data collection process was undertaken by 20 enumerators who were undergraduates, graduate university students and academics from Idlib University (Idlib city) and Sham University (Azaz). We trained the participating students on how to use KoBo Toolbox and explained to them how to use the questionnaire and gather energy consumption information. Data collection was carried out from 23 December 2018 to 25 March 2019.

The samples represented both genders and different age groups. The total number of collected responses amounted to 136, which were randomly selected from 35 communities located in the two different regions (see figure 2). This sample size is comprehensive and sufficient for a level of confidence of 95 percent and 10 percent margins of error (SurveyMonkey, 2019), as long as the number of households in the target community did not exceed four million. For the second group (i.e. generator owners) data collection was carried out from 14 March to 4 April 2019, whereby 8 generator owners within six communities in the same two regions participated in the survey. Furthermore, two academics who lived and worked in the target areas were interviewed on 22 March 2019. Within this third group, we faced some limitations as some academics were reluctant to participate due to concerns about potential future repression. Information from them could only be obtained by guaranteeing anonymity and the non-disclosure of personal data. Other academics asked for money to participate in the interviews and provide information. Therefore, it was not possible to include more academics in the study.

### Findings

The distribution of household (HH) demographics was determined through the questionnaire, as seen in table 1. The HH survey respondents were asked inter alia about the main source of electricity in their shelter, the average hours of usage and related prices (see figure 3).

The subscription of amperes to obtain electricity appeared to be a new mechanism of accessing electricity during the Syrian crisis. It depends on a private provider who deploys a relatively powerful generator and to build up an electrical mini-grid, connecting the households in the neighbourhood. Subscribers determine the amounts of amperes and hours they need per day. On average, the respondents' households subscribed to 2.5 amperes. The number of hours provided using the ampere network was different according to each provider. However, the respondents stated the availability of on average 6 hours of electricity per day.

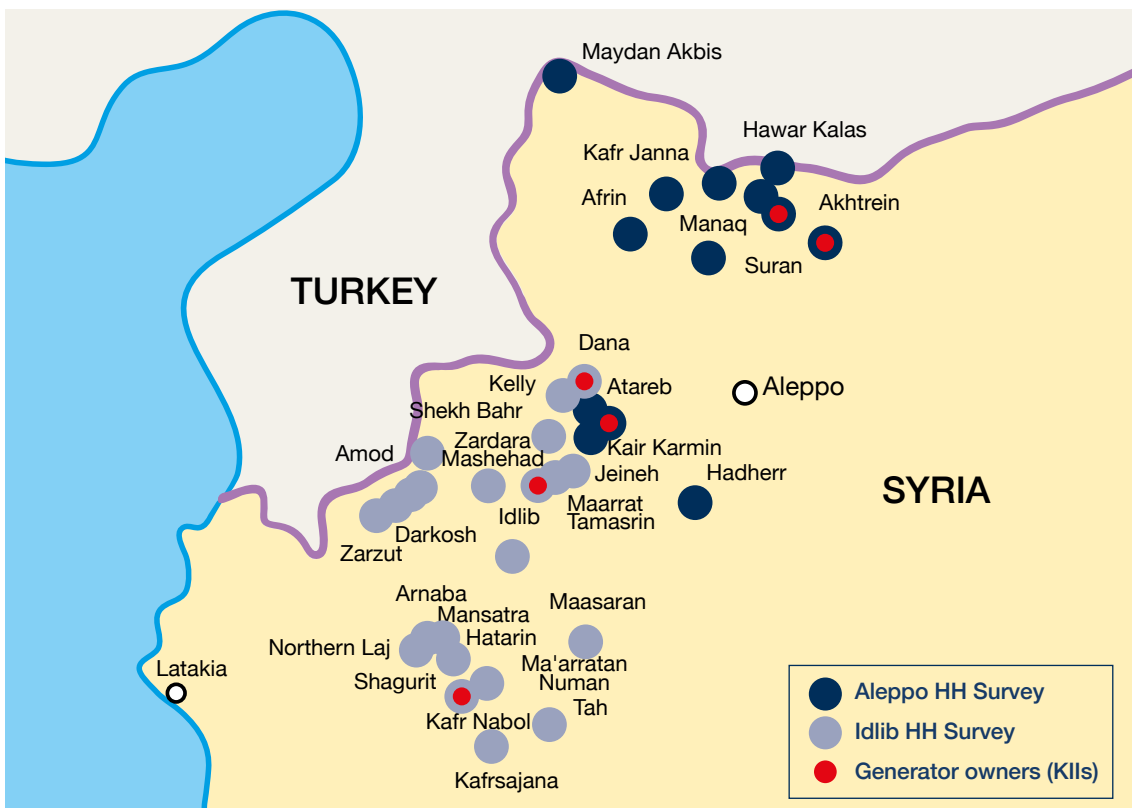
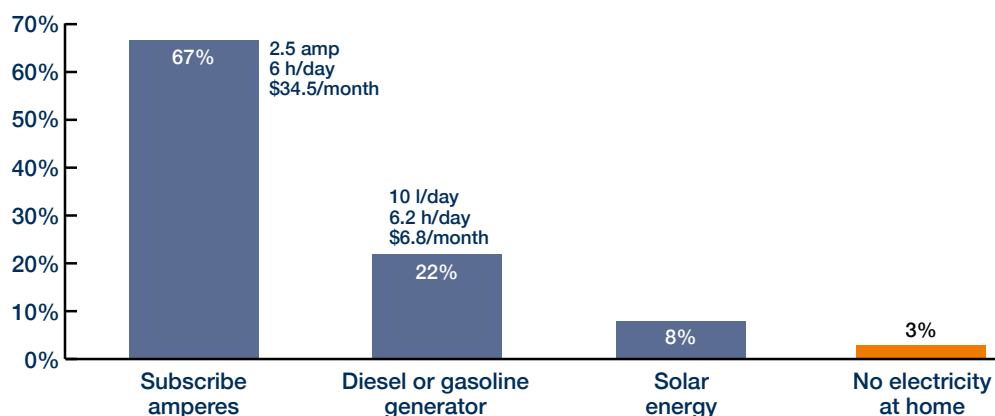


Figure 2. Mapping of targeted communities studied in surveys and KIIs

Demographic variable	Percent
<b>Respondent gender</b>	
Male	79%
Female	21%
<b>Marital status</b>	
Married	88%
Widowed	4%
Single	7%
Divorced	1%
<b>Type of household</b>	
Host community	63%
IDPs	35%
Returnees	1%
<b>Type of shelter</b>	
House	94%
Camps	4%
Collective center	2%
<b>Monthly income</b>	
SYP	64,375 SYP*
USD	129 USD*
<b>Other household demographic variables</b>	
Mean age of respondent	37 years
Mean household size	6.1 persons

\* 1 USD = 500 SYP

**Table 1.**  
Distribution of household demographics



**Figure 3.**  
Main sources of electricity, usage and prices

The second main source used for electric power was private generators. These were mainly diesel generators, with only two families reporting the use of petrol-operated ones. This source provides free choice with regard to working hours during the day. The respondents' generators worked on an average of 6.2 hours per day. The respective average daily consumption of fuel was 10 litres per day. The price of fuel is often security-dependent according to the region's dominant authorities and accessibility on the ground. However, the respondents stated 341 SYP = 0.68 USD per litre (1 USD = 500 SYP) as the average price of fuel.

The Syrian crisis strongly affected the possibility of using electric equipment at home which is due to the limited availability of electricity. Figure 4 shows the electric equipment used.

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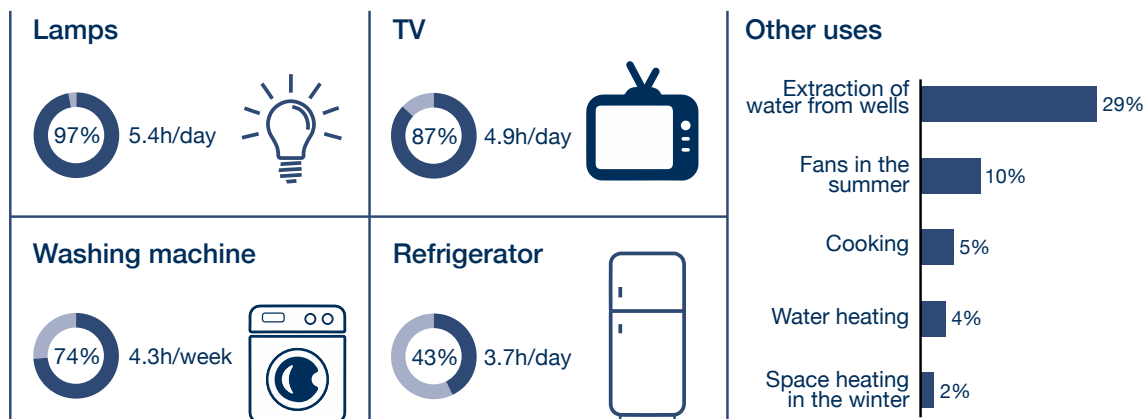


Figure 4. Electric equipment used

Variable	Value
Number of solar panels (average)	3 panels
Number of batteries (average)	2 batteries
Hours of daily work	8 hours
Cost of one solar panel	101,500 SYP*
	203 USD*

\* 1 USD ≈ 500 SYP

Table 2. Usage of solar energy and batteries

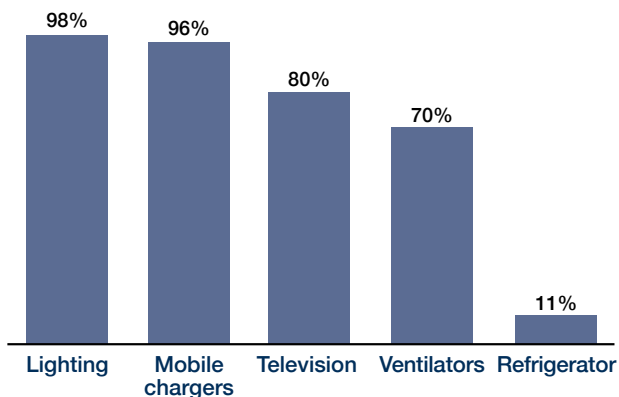
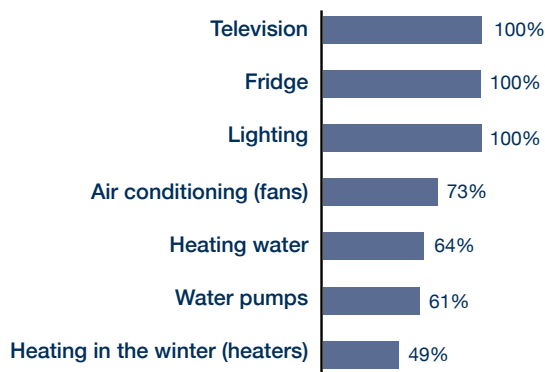


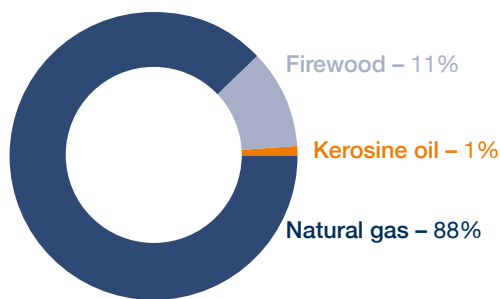
Figure 5. Electrical equipment operated on solar-powered batteries

Due to the limited availability of electricity in many areas of Syria, especially in areas beyond the control of the Syrian government, people have started using solar energy as an alternative. In general, the intensity of light radiation is high and sunshine is available for a long period of the year. Within the group of respondents, 8 percent named solar energy as the main source of electrical energy in their homes. However, 33.8 percent of them use solar panels additionally for loading batteries and for lighting as well as to power some electrical equipment (see table 2 and figure 5). In addition, 11.8 percent of respondents use solar energy to heat water for domestic use.

In order to look at the impact of the Syrian crisis with regard to electric power, a comparison between the pre- and post-civil war situations is useful. The average availability of electricity was 23 hours per day before the crisis. Figure 6 provides information about the equipment used at that time. Furthermore, figures 7 and 8 show energy sources for cooking, space heating and water heating used before the crisis. Moreover, the questionnaire also addressed the household income before the crisis and at the time of the study as shown in table 1. The average household income before the crisis was 46,000 SYP = 1,023 USD per month (1 USD = 45 SYP before 2011). The respective monthly household expenditure on electricity was 494 SYP (11 USD).

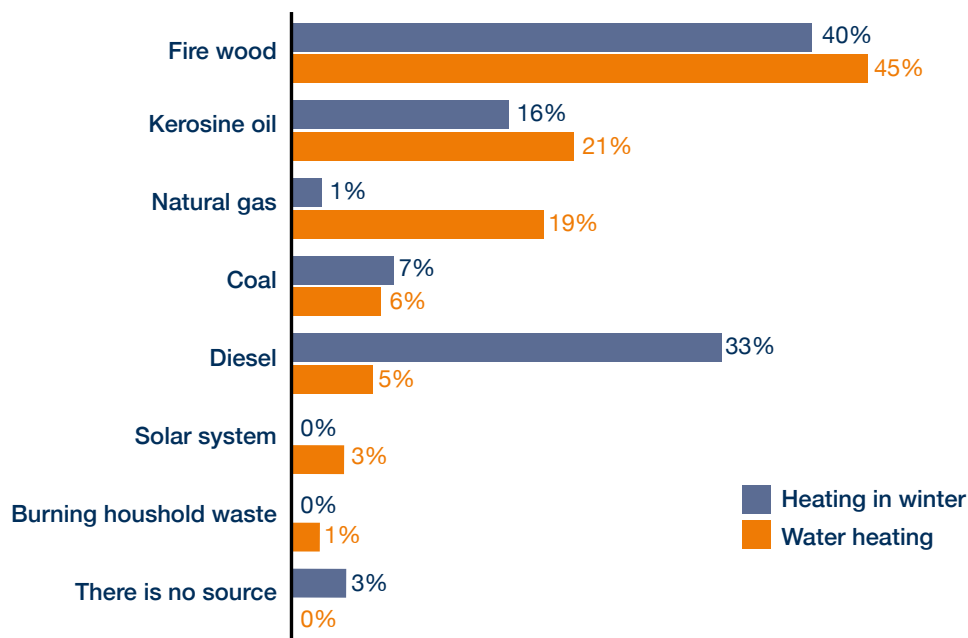


**Figure 6.**  
Electrical equipment used before the Syrian crisis

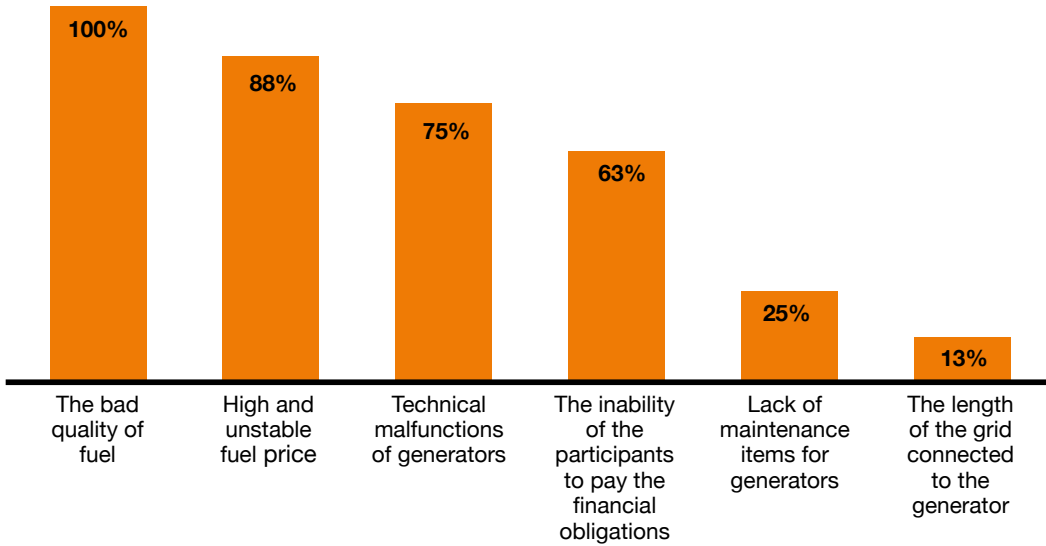


**Figure 7.**  
Energy sources for cooking

Looking at the service providers of amperes, all generator owners reported using diesel generators. The average daily consumption of diesel was 177 liters per day. The average generator ran 7.5 hours per day, while none worked more than 10 hours per day. The price of diesel per litre was reported to be at an average of 227 SYP = 0.45 USD (1 USD = 500 SYP). The average monthly price of one ampere was 8,425 SYP = 16.85 USD (1 USD = 500 SYP). Generator owners who provide electricity to subscribers also face challenges as shown in figure 9.



**Figure 8.**  
Energy sources for space heating and hot water



**Figure 9.**  
Challenges faced by generator owners who provide electricity to subscribers

During the interviews, the academics pointed out that there was a university curriculum on electrical energy generation and transmission. However, there was no curriculum related to the distribution of electricity to consumers. Therefore, these curricula were mainly theoretical and did not provide solutions for the current state of energy needs in Northwest Syria. Currently, electricity is not available at the level of mass generation to supply cities or villages. The interviewees stated that there were no student projects related to the transfer and distribution of electricity within the university and that there were no graduate students in this field. Presumably, this will create a gap between the university and the society, especially as the lack of energy is one of the most important problems facing the lives of people in these areas.

Looking at solutions, the academics could improve the present situation of electricity crisis by using alternative and renewable energy, such as solar, wind and bioenergy. The subscription of amperes could also be used as a temporary solution to cover part of the needs. They also reported about experiments in some border villages in the regions of Jarabulus and Azaz in order to benefit from the Turkish electricity network. However, this requires the restoration of the damaged infrastructure which needs network rehabilitation and distribution systems in communities far from the border.

The academics referred to solar energy being the most important source of alternative energy in Syria. Alternative energy solutions have been used recently, not only for household needs but also to irrigate crops in areas close to rivers. The academics also stressed that there were currently no studies that analysed the state of electric energy in the target areas. Furthermore, they would encourage the establishment of research centres which could bridge the gap between energy needs and generation.

### What are the implications for Syria?

This research reveals that there has been a significant loss of household income and rise of expenditure for electricity. Comparing pre-crisis income to present income shows a substantial decrease by 87 percent. On the contrary, household expenditure for electricity rose from monthly 494 SYP (equivalent to 11 USD) before the conflict started in 2011 to currently, 9,984 SYP (equivalent to 20 USD at current prices). Thus, the expenditure for electricity increased by 82 percent. Eventually, the ratio of electricity cost to household income increased from 1.1 percent to 15.5 percent, whereby the quality of supply has declined substantially.

What is striking about the statistical results is also the large discrepancy between the number of hours of electricity availability before the crisis (20 to 24

hours per day in 91 percent of the households) and limited availability now (2 to 10 hours per day). The estimated demand for electricity in Syria in 2009 of about 43,406 GW was supplied by electricity stations of the government. On the contrary, electricity generation after the crisis has become nearly entirely dependent on the private sector, namely numerous generator owners, since there is no government power station in the studied areas, which has turned the electricity sector into a purely commercial and profit oriented sector. Hence, this has entailed a high cost and a great burden to households to secure their necessary electricity needs. Beyond it, the current method for measuring the supply of electricity depends on amperes and not on watt-hours as it was before the crisis. This is a primitive method and requires the use of an ordinary circuit breaker without the need to use electronic meters. However, while maintaining the agreed level of amperes a generator owner might be tempted to lower the output voltage by choking her generator to save fuel, which adversely affects the customers' electrical appliances by reducing their lifetimes. The current electricity consumption starts from 1 ampere whereby the average voltage equals to 205 volts within a range of 130 to 250 volts. From the survey findings, it is shown that the average electricity available for household consumption is about 3 kWh per day or 1,095 kWh per year. References from comparable regions with a functioning electricity infrastructure showed a household consumption of electricity between 71,500 kWh and 26,167 kWh per year.

## Conclusion

During the war in Syria, the infrastructure of public utility services, electric power stations, transmission stations and distribution networks has been destroyed or stolen. Syrian people stayed without electricity services over long periods of time. This study demonstrated that Syrian people in the Northwestern region have access to a bare minimum level of electricity; comparatively more expensive than pre-crisis times; and supplied by private generator owners. The loss of university infrastructure and lack of research into issues around electricity supply, the academic contribution to knowledge production about electric energy has been lost. As the conflict continues, the following five conclusions can be drawn with regards to

improving access to electricity in Northwestern Syria. Firstly, the possibility of linking the Turkish electrical network to the Syrian network in these areas needs to be explored. Secondly, academics in Syrian universities should be involved in studying the extent to which current solutions to energy crisis are effective. Furthermore, the university courses could be amended, including aspects of distribution of electricity to consumers. Thirdly, the distribution of solar energy equipment to households could help mitigate their energy needs. Fourthly, large electricity generators could be provided for certain areas with high demand. Finally, the demographic indicators obtained from this study could be used to inform humanitarian support programmes as well as to design broader studies with the view of developing durable energy solutions

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# ‘My life as a second-class human being’: Experiences of a refugee academic

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## Abstract

This paper reviews some theoretical ideas about how refugees are positioned within social, psychological and humanitarian debates and then, discusses the concept of ‘refugee academics’ with references to the struggles of Syrian scholars who are living in exile. Drawing upon one Syrian academic’s experiences of displacement and academic life in exile, it argues that the social and political constructs of ‘refugeeness’ and depiction of these academics as victims or societal threats as refugees need to be transformed into narratives of human acceptance, opportunities of coproduction of knowledge, academic diversity and mutual benefits.

## Key Words

Refugee academics  
Syrian conflict  
Displacement  
Exile

## Introduction

One Friday evening, after we had our dinner in a downtown restaurant, Mohammad (pseudonym) invited us to his rented apartment for some Syrian bites and tea. My colleague and I sat on the sofa and started looking around his sitting room. There were books, artworks and artefacts that represented his ‘home’ in Syria. Every time I meet with Mohammad during my research trip to Tuleeg (pseudonym for Mohammad’s country of exile), I ask him about how the situation is like back ‘home’ in Syria. During my first meeting with him, Mohammad had mentioned about a new library he had set up at home but had to leave everything behind when he fled suddenly as the security risks mounted. In the middle of our conversation that night, he went silent for a moment and mentioned, ‘I never thought I would live my life as a second-class human being.’ This was an individual who was professionally well accomplished as a medical doctor, public health professional and academic researcher but suddenly found himself devoid of his political rights, personal freedom, professional dignity because of being a refugee.

In conflict-affected settings and autocratic regimes, academic freedom, scholarship and safety of scholars is often at risk. This paper reviews some theoretical debates about social discrimination of refugees and experiences of Syrian refugee academics and then, reports on experiences of Mohammad, one such academic who is living in exile in Tuleeg. I first met with Mohammad in 2014 and was inspired by his wealth of experience, positivity and intellect, which, later on, developed into research collaboration and friendship. As a researcher on education in conflict-settings, I have always found Mohammad’s story inspirational as well as revealing, hence, invited him to a research interview to reflect upon his journey to and experience of life in exile. This interview was conducted in May 2020 as part of a larger research project that focuses on

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developing sustainable ways to improve the quality of life of the people in protracted crisis. Reflecting upon his experiences as a refugee academic and engaging with theoretical ideas, the paper argues that social and political constructs of ‘refugeeness’ tend to override all other forms of identities and the academic in exile is no exception. Comparatively, from the basic survival perspective, refugee academics might be considered privileged given their extended social and cultural capital and personal agency to navigate pressures around access to food, health and education for their children but limitations around spatial mobility, political freedom and uncertainty around their futures are similar to general refugee populations who are stuck in camps or host communities.

Firstly, this paper provides some theoretical discussions on the critique of humanitarianism and ways attitudes towards refugees are produced in host countries. Then, a brief review of the concept of refugee academics and support systems is provided before discussing the debilitating experiences of Syrian refugee academics. This is followed by an analysis of displacement experiences of the Syrian academic and a conclusion is drawn with reference to the theoretical ideas and wider issues of academics in exile.

## Humanitarianism and attitudes towards refugees

Historically, the use of term ‘refugees’ has been helpful in advocating for protection of forcibly displaced populations from neglect and persecution in their host communities. The definition of refugees also reminds host governments of their legal obligations to protect human rights and basic needs of the non-citizens who live within their territorial boundaries (UNHCR, 1951). It helps the international community and national governments to uphold the agenda of justice, refugees’ rights to return home or get resettled and the need for political engagement to address the causes of human sufferings. International agreements on the protection of refugees underpin the notion of human rights and national governments’ humanitarian responsibilities beyond their own citizens. However, there is also a growing critique of humanitarianism as a field of research and practice which is dominated by western agendas, funding and staffing that is opposed in many Southern contexts (Pacitto and

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013; Egeland, 2011; Chimni, 2000). Humanitarian agencies in these settings may be perceived as agents of neo-colonial Northern dominations with implicit security and economic interests. The international humanitarian regime has lately been critiqued as ‘a contemporary manifestation of colonial imperatives’ (Pacitto and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013: 6). Chimni described humanitarianism as ‘the ideology of hegemonic states in the era of globalisation marked by the end of the Cold War and a growing North-South divide’ (Chimni, 2000: 244), used to justify interventionism, often selective, on the ground of human security but mainly on the basis of whether there are geopolitical or economic benefits to the Western powers. Klein (2008) points out that emergencies such as natural disasters and violent conflicts are often followed by vigorous neoliberal policies, undermining the state’s responsibility to cater for the needs of the affected populations; intensifying corporatisation of public services; and pushing through free market in which the emergency works as a ‘shock therapy’. In contexts of crisis where opportunities are scarce and economic hardships are severe, competitive free market regimes destroy citizens’ safety nets and the presence of refugees in those contexts only fuels citizens’ perceptions of their social and economic vulnerability.

From a social psychology perspective, like immigrants, refugees also may face two types of attitudes from citizens: ‘group inclusion’ that brings out shared, egalitarian natures or prospects of contribution to their society, or ‘group threat’ exposing citizens’ prejudicial, oppressive natures (Pratto and Lemieux, 2001). ‘Group inclusion’ may be increased when there are social and economic benefits of refugee inflows to the host communities. For example, refugees ‘can bring skills and contribute to the human capital stock, as well as stimulate trade and investment’, as well as ‘create employment opportunities, and attract aid and humanitarian investments in, for example, infrastructure, which would benefit refugees as well as the society as a whole’ (Khoudour and Andersson, 2017: 11). However, refugees also place a burden on host countries’ public expenditures with negative impacts on labour market outcomes such as wages, employment and labour force participation of the host population (Khoudour and Andersson, 2017: 12).

These experiences exemplify 'group threat', creating inter-group tensions between refugees and host communities.

Citizens' attitudes towards refugees also characterise ideas of 'fairness' on humanitarian grounds or 'threats' to their own social identity or economic wellbeing. The 'fairness motives' lead to a welcoming environment to refugees and asylum seekers whereas, the 'threat motives' produce hatred, racism, exclusion or rejection (Louis *et al.*, 2007: 54). These dilemmas are deeply rooted in citizens' understanding and increased awareness of 'social identity (who are we and who are they?), prejudice and discrimination (how do we feel about each other and how do we treat each other?) and intergroup relations (what relation will our groups have?)' (Pratto and Lemieux, 2001: 413–414). Social recognition of refugees as rightful human beings, accepting them in the employment sector and their inclusion in professional roles as non-hierarchical members of the society become contested processes.

Social dominance theory provides a useful theoretical explanation to the prevalence of complex 'intergroup relations' between refugees and host communities. As Pratto and Lemieux (2001: 414) note, such relations can be 'understood by analyzing how individual propensities for prejudice, socially shared meaning systems, and institutional discrimination relate to one another' (also see: Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). From this perspective, individuals who have higher levels of social dominance orientation (SDO) tend to believe in social hierarchies and have negative attitudes towards those who represent low power groups such as, refugees. Whereas, those who have low levels of SDO believe that equal treatment of people can reduce social problems. These belief systems are reflected in people's support for social policies relating to refugees, 'that is, people high on SDO generally support policies that would enhance and maintain social hierarchy, whereas people low on SDO generally support policies that would attenuate social hierarchy' (Pratto and Lemieux, 2001: 418). However, in contemporary social psychology research, there are two lines of explanation about why some people are more prejudiced than others: personal attributes, asserting that prejudice is a 'personality trait' (Allport, 1954) and 'people's social identity, social self-categorization, or social position' (Ekehammar *et al.*, 2004: 464). In other

words, people's innate personality characteristics and their social conditioning predict their attitudes towards the out-groups. In particular, historical events (e.g. sectarian or ethnic violence, civil wars, conflict between the country of refugee origin and host country etc.), national political dynamics and social structures (e.g. religious or ethnic composition of the host society in relation to the backgrounds of the refugee populations) shape the processes of in-group's self-categorisation and socio-political positioning. These theoretical ideas are useful in explaining why refugee academics, as low power groups, are discriminated against or welcomed in host countries' institutional environments. For example, as Watenpaugh *et al.* (2014: 14) note, 'Lebanese policy makers and much of the population view social problems, politics, and security issues through the lens of sectarian communal identification while abstract notions of common Lebanese citizenship or human rights have little currency'.

Refugees are often represented as depersonalised corporeal entities who have been displaced, maimed and homeless. As Malkki (1996: 378) argues, the process of dehistoricising and homogenising refugee category as universal men, women and children turn them into 'mute victims'. Additionally, the state-centric approach to defining political identity deprives non-citizens of their ability to influence policies and regulations that impact on their lives within the host countries. This situation delegates the responsibility of representing refugee voice, with few exceptions, to international agencies, such that 'narration of refugee experiences becomes the prerogative of Western 'experts': refugee lives become a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced' (Rajaram, 2002: 247). Both the media representation of refugees and their depiction in the humanitarian literature in the form of visual, textual and digital resources reproduces the notion of 'refugeeness' as speechless physical bodies devoid of individuality and political agency. These representations tend to generate 'pity' and serve for fundraising for humanitarian agencies but also reproduce the generalised Western narratives about refugee experiences – as victimhood. Rajaram (2002: 251) further argues that the generalisation of refugees as depoliticised helpless victims obscures 'the particularity of different sorts of refugee experience'. This is not to deny that refugee populations are in urgent need of humanitarian aid such as food, shelter, healthcare and education, nor

to deny their past experience of violence and political persecution or ongoing social and political exclusion in the host societies, but to argue that defining their existence within the boundaries of helplessness and speechlessness offers an unhelpful and incomplete characterisation of their being. Malkki rightly points out that in abstracting refugees' 'predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts, humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees' (Malkki, 1996: 378). Silencing the refugee voice is a process of denial of individual humanity as well as to restrict narratives about rights and freedoms within the state territoriality. As a consequence, 'refugee identity' underpins notions of their origin, culture and nationality and hence, they need to be either reunited with their nation of origin (right of return) or resettled to find new home and new citizenship based on their preference.

Refugees are perceived as a threat to 'societal security', a notion that refers to a society's ability to sustain and reproduce its essential character (Wæver, Buzan and Kelstrup, 1993). In this sense, a group's societal security is threatened when they are prevented from reproducing their social identity and transmitting it to new generations. Unlike state security which puts emphasis on the analysis of its territorial integrity and national sovereignty, societal security has 'identity' in the centre of analysis. Hence, societal insecurity exemplifies threats to dominant ethno-national and religious identities whose survival, quality of life and national identity is perceived to be at risk because of refugee inflows. Shanks (2019: 16) notes, 'for societies that perceive a threat to their identity, whether the threat is real or imagined, a clear defensive strategy is to strengthen societal security'. Such a defensive strategy could constitute anti-refugee media campaigns, portraying refugees as a national security threat; right-wing vilification of refugees as undesirable beneficiaries of social welfare system; and revival of ultra-nationalism. At a practical level, these approaches are manifested through prevention of refugees in the national policy discourse, excluding them from access to education, health services and employment. However, the societal security theory overestimates communities as homogenous entities and undermines in-group contestations in which some individuals may be willing to embrace societal change characterised by openness, equality, and acceptance of out-groups who may have become victims of conflict or political persecution.

## 'Refugee academics'

Boyd, Akker and Wintour (2009: 53–54) note that 'when regimes are, or become, dictatorial, or where civil strife intensifies, those who 'speak truth unto power' through criticism, through pointing out alternative possibilities, or through upholding ethical standards – key academic duties – are all too likely to suffer job loss, imprisonment, torture or expulsion.' Mass displacement of academics places huge cost on the country of their origin not only in terms of the loss of human capital but also destruction of intellectual life of the entire community. For example, a large-scale expulsion of researchers, philosophers and scientists from Nazi Germany had a debilitating impact on the country's academic position, a world leader in scholarship before Hitler, which never managed to regain its academic strength post-World War II (Medawar and Pyke, 2000). On the contrary, refugee scholars contribute to scientific, intellectual and cultural life of the receiving societies, and to internationalism and academic transformation in the academic environment of their host institutions (Elsner, 2017). During the World War II, British institutions received several German academics who held positions in different Oxford, Cambridge and London colleges (Brockliss, 2017). However, refugee academics often encounter nationalist protests, marginalisation and rejection within the host academic environment (Brockliss; 2017; Özdemir, 2019). Historically, even the appointment of a distinguished scholar like Albert Einstein at Oxford was protested on the grounds that public funds should only be used to support British scholars (Grenville, 2017: 53). Grenville (2017: 55) further notes that refugee academics were marginalised both socially and professionally and deprived of 'access to Oxford's social networks, while pressure to protect 'British' jobs from foreign intruders created a situation where only the determined advocacy of the refugees' supporters could overcome the barriers'.

Many of these academics were then supported by the Academic Assistance Council (AAC, later the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL)) and now the Cara (Council for At-Risk Academics)<sup>1</sup>. Boyd, Akker and Wintour (2009: 53) present the testimony of Albie Sachs, one such grantee of Cara fellowship who would later become a Justice of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of South Africa. Sachs describes his experience of becoming a refugee and gratitude of

receiving support from Cara as, 'you feel crushed. You lose self-esteem, and although the political will remains strong, you suffer... I received just the right touch of warmth of heart and practicality [from the organisation].' Today, there are other organisations such as the Scholar Rescue Fund – Institute of International Education (SRF-IIE) and Scholars at Risk Network (SAR) that support at-risk academics under the principles of humanitarian compassion. Even though these support programmes have been exceptionally worthwhile both to individuals in establishing their academic lives and to human society through their scientific contributions (e.g. 16 of Cara supported scholars have won Nobel prizes), Özdemir (2019: 1) argues that the appropriateness of such 'compassionate temperament' can be questioned in understanding the experiences of at-risk academics who have been exiled due to political persecution. He argues that 'the emotions of pity and compassion cannot provide a political panacea for those who are exiled via political processes' and the framing of 'victimhood' limits the necessity 'to consult, study and draw conclusions' from how these moral emotions impact on their diverse experiences in exile (Özdemir, 2019: 3-4). A range of research contributions by Syrian academics in exile, included in this Special Issue, and elsewhere (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018), epitomises the need for academic support and collaboration rather than mere humanitarian compassion. The following section will briefly discuss conflict and displacement-related experiences of Syrian academics.

### Struggles of displaced Syrian academics

Since the civil war began in 2011, Syrian higher education has been severely disrupted due to the large-scale academic displacement and destruction of physical infrastructure, erosion of institutional capacities and loss of human capital (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019; Barakat and Milton, 2015; Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014a; 2014b). In addition to forced displacement of university students, between 1500 – 2000 university professors have also fled the country (King, 2016). Those who have stayed back may support the regime; are compelled to keep low profiles and remain silent about its aggressive actions; are unable to take risks of leaving the country; not qualified enough or lack in confidence

to find academic work in foreign institutions; and may have difficult social and family circumstances preventing them to leave the country (Anonymous, 2016). The Syrian Ministry of Higher Education has also barred its academics from taking up external unpaid sabbaticals, making it impossible for them to work temporarily outside without losing their positions in Syria, while anyone who leaves Syria would be considered 'traitors to the nation' (Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014a). There is also mandated conscription of men over 18 and regulated through military service booklets and the government has established roaming and temporary check points to catch the military service dodgers (King, 2016). Anyone who is found to have evaded the mandatory military service is prosecuted and universities are instructed to hire only those who have completed the military service and to withhold salaries if staff are found not to have served in the armed forces (King, 2016: 12).

Syrian academics in exile are 'often unable to continue their academic work due to legal status, language barriers, psychological trauma, unrecognised qualifications, and other factors' (Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2020: 185). Those academics who have been displaced to Syria's neighbouring countries are afraid of being targeted for violent attacks because of their political positions on the Syrian conflict. Watenpaugh *et al.*, (2014a: 27) also note that the Assad regime's network in Lebanon and possible threats to Syrian academics discourage university administrators in Lebanon from hiring Syrian faculty with anti-Assad political views. Islamic State (IS) continues to pose a threat to the personal safety of Syrian academics in the South of Turkey who oppose its ideology (Cara, 2019: 77).

A collaborative study between academics from the University of Cambridge and Syrian academics in exile highlights some powerful testimonies of Syrian academics' journey into displacement, experiences in exile and reflections on professional and civic identity before and after their displacement (Cara, 2019). Many academics tried to maintain 'relational equilibrium' (Pherali, 2016: 485) between different armed groups and the state army as a survival strategy but the fear of detention and being caught in the crossfire forced them to flee (Cara, 2019).

<sup>1</sup>Most of the papers in this Special Issue have been contributed by Syrian academics who have been supported by Cara for their research and academic development. See Hanley's paper for evaluation of Cara programmes in this issue.

In exile, their economic, social and political vulnerability constantly reminds them of their home, fulfilling professional career and stable family life back in Syria, which has been lost to the violent conflict. Many of them refuse to accept 'any affiliation with refugee status,' because it strips them from exercising their agency and reminds of 'being rootless, stateless and rejected' (Cara, 2019: 78). This rejection stems from difficult living conditions in exile, quest for a sense of belonging and loss of dignity and independence in life. Parkinson *et al.* (2018) also provide a rich account of their stressful experiences in exile and highlight the need of mutual collaboration; and international academic solidarity. Building upon the notions of 'relational expertise' and 'relational agency' (Edwards, 2011), broadly defined as aptitudes to coproduce knowledge through nonhierarchical collaborations, they argue that 'Syrian academics and their international partners must develop ways of working together to sustain academic activity and develop strategies and resources for the present and future' (Parkinson *et al.*, 2018: 145).

Despite a clear sense of pride in their profession and academic identity, most Syrian academics are unable to continue their academic work in exile (Faulkner, 2020). For example, in Lebanon, 'with few exceptions, Syrian academics are unable to secure academic work in Lebanese universities without external support from international organisations' (Watenpaugh *et al.*, 2014a: 33). There are, however, some international organisations such as Cara who support Syrian academics in exile to secure academic work through fellowships or to engage in research (see Hanley in this issue). These organisations help displaced academics to secure placements in international institutions and provide research support, which is 'transformational for individuals' but 'this approach is resource-heavy and limited to academics who are able to travel' (Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2020: 186). The scale of demand is much higher than the capacity of these programmes. International placement programmes are also unhelpful for many such as, female scholars who are culturally restricted from being able to travel unaccompanied, and those do not have passports or travel documents, preventing them from travelling out of or within the country of exile. It may also be difficult for some academics to produce proof of

qualifications and transcripts which may have been lost, damaged or left behind when they fled the war (Pherali and Abu Moghli, 2019). Given the rise of ethno-nationalist and anti-refugee politics in Europe and the US, chances of securing visas to travel abroad are also limited.

### Reflecting on the experiences of a Syrian academic in exile

Now, I return to my conversation with Mohammad whose journey into displacement, experience of academic and social life in exile and the unknown future depict an array of psychological vulnerability. Mohammad describes that his 'refugee identity' makes him feel inferior among his fellow academics and vulnerable within his social and professional space in exile. He points out that the notions of 'exile' and 'refugee academics' carry different meanings in different contexts and not all refugee academics would be fully equipped to work in international academic institutions:

Maybe there is a broad definition to depict the notions of 'academician' and 'exile'. Exile is not one. Exile in Lebanon is different from exile in Stockholm or in Germany or in a good university in the UK. It could be more difficult in Egypt or in Lebanon or in Yemen. So, experience of exile is not the same. Likewise, academician also could not be the same because the academic environments and host country contexts determine the experiences of refugee academics.

As noted in the testimonies of Syrian academics in exile (Cara, 2019; Parkinson *et al.*, 2018), Mohammad also describes his professional life prior to displacement as stable, fulfilling and successful. He describes: 'At the start of my career, I was a practicing clinician. Then, I began to work as a public health practitioner, beside my clinical practice as a surgeon. I supervised public health programmes under the Ministry of Health in Syria. So, my knowledge about public health stems from practice, not from academic research'. He further expounds:

When I moved into research and received a big research grant from a US foundation, we established a research centre. In Syria, it is not possible to operate independently so, we tried to be affiliated with a university and build partnerships with NGOs that were working on the issues of chronic diseases. The city

where I lived was fairly quiet at the start of the uprising in 2011, so, we kept doing our work. But interestingly, by mid 2011, when we started implementing our research, it was increasingly difficult to collaborate with the university and Ministry of Health. Our offices were also located in the frontline of clashes between the rebels and government forces so, we faced the physical risk of accessing our office premises. Because we were an independent research centre and our project was funded by the US money, the regime would treat us as US spies.

Medical doctors like Mohammad also faced heightened pressures from the regime because of their professional backgrounds. Since late 2011, health care has been weaponised in the Syrian conflict involving attacks on 'health-care facilities, targeting health workers, obliterating medical neutrality, and besieging medicine' (Fouad *et al.*, 2017: 2516) and health professionals who provided health care to the injured protesters were also treated as enemies of the state. More importantly, they were required to report the case of medical treatment to the government. Mohammad notes: 'We started treating the injured protesters. It was not something the Syrian government wanted to see. So, they wanted health professionals to leave or else get killed if they supported the Syrian opposition.' As a result, health workers' professional ethics were highjacked by the militarised state. In mid 2012, another wave of state repression began, involving kidnapping of health workers for ransom (Baker, 2014), and the state ignored criminal activities conducted by the pro-regime militia. This was when many doctors started leaving Syria because of the fear of being kidnapped, as well as the fact that they were not able to practice ethically. Some doctors were arrested, and some were tortured to death. Mohammad lamented:

...for me, personally, one of my colleagues was arrested and killed and other three were kidnapped, either themselves or their kids. Then, I felt very scared. I was in a dilemma about whether to stay or leave. I had young children. We had just built a new house. I loved my city and friends and I was not well. I started feeling that someone would come any time and kidnap me. So, I decided to leave and considered multiple destinations – Turkey or Lebanon or Egypt. Very few decided to go

to the gulf states, the idea that I did not like. I also considered going to Europe through smuggling, crossing the border illegally via Turkey. You could go to Turkey or Egypt without a visa at that time. So, many went to Turkey to try to go to Europe.

Mohammad wanted to stay close to Syria and did not think that the crisis would last long. So, he decided to go to Tuleeg because it was close to his home city and had some historical connections in the country. He had also hoped to immigrate to Europe but was luckily offered a visiting position at a prestigious university in Tuleeg. This gave him a sense of stability temporarily and the prospect of returning home as and when the war ended. Unfortunately, neither has the war ended, nor has he secured permanent residency in Tuleeg. Mohammad is stuck in 'limbo' (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017) like many other refugees in the MENAT region, even though the academic job he has managed to secure is incomparably better than the situation of many fellow academics in exile. However, Mohammad feels that he is underestimated because he does not have academic qualifications from a prestigious university and his previous affiliation is a mediocre university in Syria; he is a Syrian and, most significantly, he is a refugee in the host country. He elaborates:

Syrians are not generally welcomed here although I am generally fine in the university atmosphere. But going outside the university bubble, it is quite difficult. If you take a taxi and your accent is Syrian, the taxi driver would not be very happy. The best I get is pity for my situation but always making me feel that I am not very welcomed here, and I might take their jobs.

Mohammad reflects on his conversation with the dean of the research centre in his host university almost eight years ago when he mentioned that he wanted to work on refugee health. He was not received well, as refugee matters were perceived to be NGO business and not part of any serious academic research. He was able to transfer his existing fully funded research project on tobacco consumption and public health into his host university. In his own personal time, he started developing research proposals and building partnerships to work on refugee health issues which led to some impressive success. He now feels proud

to have attracted a significant amount of funding for research into chronic diseases among refugee populations. He explains:

Over the last eight years, I have secured 4.5 million dollars on 11 research projects and published 40 peer-reviewed articles in several journals, including the Lancet plus British Medical Journal and almost 20 commentaries and 4/5 reports. I have established refugee health as an important area of academic work. I can probably claim that I was one of the very few people who advocated for the issue of chronic diseases in humanitarian settings at the time when no one within humanitarian agencies was talking about this issue.

The above statement exemplifies an impressive level of academic success and contribution Mohammad has made to the host institution and in the area of refugee health. This has been possible with his hard work over the past eight years. Mohammad adds:

I should say, at one point of my career here, I almost lost my confidence. I work really hard – not sure if I made a worthy contribution, but due to the fear of being dismissed or of not being able to renew the contract or residence permit in the country, I worked almost 80 hours a week – more than 12 hours a day.

Mohammad's 'refugee identity', Syrian background and deep knowledge about chronic diseases among Syrian refugees have also opened up new opportunities for international research collaboration. With his successful portfolio of academic work, Mohammad feels that he is now taken more seriously within the institution even though there is 'an issue of the elite club deeply embedded' within the academic community, reminiscent of Grenville's (2017) description of social and professional marginalisation of refugee academics in Oxford some 80 years ago. Mohammed lamented: 'I am still on an annual contract, still cannot ask for permanent residency or work permit for my wife in Tuleeg.' Recently, in recognition of his work, Mohammad has been offered a job in a prestigious US university, but the COVID-19 crisis and Trump's anti-refugee policies have pushed his life in to further 'unknowns'. He painfully reports, that being a Syrian means that 'uncertainty is a way of living'.

Mohammad notes that he is grateful to his host institution and colleagues who have supported him and his children's university fees have been waived but, being the only Syrian among 800 faculty in the university, he metaphorically depicts his survival as 'a gladiator; you have to fight to survive'. Socially, his family lives in fear of discrimination – children do not speak in Arabic outside home, despite Arabic being a commonly spoken language in his host country, to avoid being identified as Syrians, and his wife, a qualified engineer, had to sign a legal document to refrain from work as a condition of his annual residence permit in Tuleeg. After completing university, his children would not get the residence permits or employment – his daughter managed to leave Tuleeg already after graduation and he is concerned about his son who would have to seek asylum elsewhere next year.

Mohammad's social and professional experience in Tuleeg shows that 'refugee identity' overrides his personal, social and professional identities. He feels that it is frustrating to be labelled as a refugee because:

...refugee is a downstream labelling. When you get this label, you automatically become inferior. Wherever you are, whatever you do. You are second to the counterpart. In this global system, you are put in a way that you are confronting the citizen. You are the enemy of the citizen. So, you are someone who needs assistance. It is not sort of sharing or collaborating. So, that's the problem. Academician is something second. Because it does not matter being an academician because being a refugee already makes you a less worthy person.

This shows that, for refugee academics, 'refugeeness' is a label or an imposed category that violates all other forms of social identities that they belong to. The formation of a social identity involves self-categorisation, emphasising similarities between the self and other in-group members and differences between the self and out-group members (Hogg and Abrams 1988). They may 'self-categorise' as refugees or 'socially compare' themselves with the other groups but unlike the formation of social identity as a process of enhancing 'self-esteem' (Stets and Burke, 2000: 225), refugee academics find the term 'refugee' to be dismissive of their other identities that embody their self-respect and dignity.



## Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed some complex social and psychological dimensions that determine host communities' attitudes towards refugees, including exiled scholars. Social acceptance or rejection of exiled academics depends on host communities' perceptions about and attitudes towards refugees; a sense of social identity; and societal in/security of the host communities. The humanitarian narratives about refugees also predominantly underpin the notions of victimhood – vulnerable, undeserved and burdensome, which unhelpfully undermine refugee academics' potential and agency to produce globally relevant knowledge as well as to rebuild higher education in their country of origin.

The experience of exclusion and discrimination in the host country constantly reminds displaced academics of their 'refugeeness' which they find humiliating and disempowering to their identity as an academic. Despite their unwillingness to be labelled as a 'refugee', 'refugeeness' constantly creeps into realities of their life in exile and overrides their sense of freedom and self-respect. Academics like Mohammad are a small minority of Syrians who have successfully managed to continue their careers in exile despite numerous barriers. Yet, Mohammad's experience represents a troubling precarity about life in exile as well as the resource one refugee academic can bring into the host institution. Discontinuation of academic activities of Syrian scholars in exile hints a tragic loss of research and scholarship with a subsequent detrimental impact on the future prospect of Syrian higher education.

There is an urgent need to expand and reconfigure the discourse of vulnerability and helplessness to that of resource, agency and synergy that can be utilised to collectively respond to the crisis in higher education. There is also the need for attitudinal change from nationalist rejection to humanitarian acceptance of refugees as a global responsibility to deal with humanitarian crises that jeopardise the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, 2015). To this end, national debates and policies need to be shifted towards a process of harnessing refugee academics' knowledge, skills and networks that benefit all.

Promisingly, there are some shifts in academic discourses as well as in research collaborations that acknowledge the shared responsibility to protect academic freedom, the research knowledge and the scholars at-risk, which reveal that refugee academics, if provided an opportunity and supported, can make a valuable contribution to the intellectual life of host institutions and their society. These shifts must be expanded and mainstreamed in the political, humanitarian and economic systems both at the national and global levels.

## Author bio

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