

# *Uncounted and Unacknowledged: Syria's Refugee University Students and Academics in Jordan*

*A joint project of the UC Davis Human Rights Initiative and  
the Institute of International Education*



*Za'atari Refugee Camp-city, Mafraq, Jordan (April 2013)*

Syria's civil conflict has had a tremendous impact on the country's students, professors and universities. This is a brief preliminary report by a multidisciplinary research collaboration between the **University of California, Davis Human Rights Initiative (UC Davis-HRI)** and the **Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF)** that took place in Jordan (April 15-21, 2013) on the status of Syrian refugee university academics and university students.

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*Research team members meet with women students at Za'atari Refugee Camp-city, Mafraq, Jordan. April 2013*

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Most of all, we thank the Syrian university-age refugees, and their faculty counterparts, who spoke with us candidly about their problems and aspirations. We dedicate this report to them, and the hope that with their talent and drive they will be able to build a brighter future for Syria.

## Methodology

This assessment of educational opportunities for Syrian university-age refugees and work opportunities for Syrian refugee academics was carried out by a multidisciplinary research team that included Arabic-speakers and experts on Syria. The methods included qualitative and quantitative research based on interviews with Syrian faculty and students in Jordan's capital of Amman and at the massive refugee camp-city of Za'atari near the Syrian border. In the course of two focus groups and one-on-one meetings with urban and camp refugees, the team interviewed a total of 33 university-age Syrians whose studies had been disrupted. To facilitate and bring additional methodological rigor to the interviews, the team developed an assessment tool that organized the responses of the students and helped build a comparative framework for analysis. This assessment also includes information from individual interviews with Syrian students and faculty both in and outside of Jordan, as well as stakeholder interviews with members and representatives of the Jordanian royal family, including Prince Al-Hassan bin Talal, the Secretary-General of the Arab Thought Forum, Dr. Elsadig Bakheet Elfaqih, the President of Philadelphia University (Jordan), Dr. Marwan Kamal, Professor Fadi Skeiker (University of Jordan), representatives of several NGOs working to address the Syrian refugee crisis, including CARE UNESCO, and International Relief and Development (IRD), and officials within the U.S. State Department's Office of Education and Cultural Affairs.



*Research team members meet with men students at Za'atari Refugee Camp-city, Mafraq, Jordan. April 2013*

## Introduction

The following is a brief preliminary report on the status of refugee academics and university students from Syria residing in Jordan prepared by a multidisciplinary research collaboration between the University of California Davis Human Rights Initiative (UCD-HRI) and the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF). It is based on a field assessment that took place in Jordan during the period April 15-21, 2013. The observations and conclusions are solely those of the report's authors and are not necessarily those of the University of California, IIE-SRF or any other organizations and individuals that contributed to this project.

This report is not intended to be a comprehensive account; rather, its purpose is to initiate a conversation across the fields of higher education, international non-governmental relief and humanitarian assistance and government-based foreign assistance programs to address the conditions facing Syrian students and faculty affected by the civil conflict in Syria.

## Summary and Key Findings

As the civil conflict in Syria enters its third year, the institutional framework within which higher education takes place has begun to collapse and, in some parts of the country, has disappeared entirely. A climate of civil and political insecurity, state violence and conflict between the state and armed rebels have created conditions that render teaching and research at Syria's state and private universities not only difficult, but dangerous. The general climate of insecurity has led to the internal displacement of university students and academics. University students and academics are also present in the refugee populations that have fled Syria into neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt. The collapsing nature of higher education inside Syria and the attendant internal and external displacement of faculty and students is a generally unacknowledged and unmet component of the larger civilian Syrian humanitarian disaster.

The dual impact of institutional collapse and worsening security means that Syria faces the loss of a generation of university graduates. These constitute a special group within the conflict's victims because they include Syria's brightest and most ambitious young people. They are the human capital that will be critical to the rebuilding of Syrian society after the conflict has ended, and they will have an even more crucial role to play as a modern and moderating force in confronting the religious intolerance and ethnic hatred that increasingly defines the war in their homeland. And in a very real way, their forced separation from their studies constitutes a cause of their suffering, and thus, a violation of their human rights and an assault on their dignity.

### Major Findings

- 1) University students are present in all major Syrian refugee populations in Jordan – camp-based; urban refugees; elite exiles.
- 2) Syrian refugee university students are eager to continue their studies and are prepared to travel further afield to do so. Students and their families indicated that they are prepared to make incredible sacrifices for the sake of continuing and completing their education.
- 3) While Jordan has adhered generally to the humanitarian principles of refugee assistance and has generously provided Syrian refugees with a high degree of human security and safety, the country is facing mounting economic, environmental, and social pressures. Therefore, Jordan is an increasingly inhospitable location for refugees, a fact that will impact the ability of Syrians to move about the country and could lead to difficult interactions with Jordanian authorities and the general population.
- 4) Tuition, fees and the cost of living in Jordan are all much higher than in Syria, so much so that continuing education at a Jordanian university is out of reach for all but a small elite of Syrian refugee students.
- 5) Students often arrive in Jordan without necessary travel documents, records of academic progress, or certificates. The services of the Syrian Embassy in Amman, which remains loyal to the Assad government in Damascus, are generally unavailable to those who have crossed into Jordan without a Syrian exit permit. This has made it difficult for some Syrians to enroll in Jordanian universities.
- 6) Syrian refugee academics have few opportunities to find positions in the Jordanian academy. The support of third party donors will be critical to assisting such scholars in finding positions.

### Primary Recommendations

- 1) A broad-based census of Syrian refugee university students should be undertaken in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey that includes both urban and refugee camp-based individuals; this should be matched with the assessment of academic needs of Syrian IDPs.
- 2) Major funding organizations and donors should engage the Jordanian private and public education sector with a view to developing a consortium that would provide assistance to Syrian refugee students.

- 3) A program should be developed to help Syrian students travel to other Arab countries, primarily Egypt, with its robust higher education sector and relatively inexpensive living costs, to continue their studies.
- 4) Ways for Syrian refugee students to take critical national exams, most notably the high school exit exam, in Jordan or other places of safety should be created by the UNHCR in consultation with appropriate educational authorities.
- 5) Many refugee academics are imagining a trajectory in which they will return to Syria, as shown by their activism and community organizing. Therefore, the best strategy for supporting such academics may be regional programming that allows for ease of communication with, and eventually travel to, Syria.
- 6) In addition to the current practice of supporting visiting academic appointments, IIE-SRF and other groups assisting scholars in peril should collaborate with Amman-based research organizations (for example, the American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR), the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, the Arab Thought Forum, Columbia University Middle East Research Center) to create short-term, three to six-month research fellowships in Jordan and the MENA region.
- 7) Colleges and universities outside Syria should support Syrian refugee students and academics to continue their studies and academic work through programs like the IIE-Scholar Rescue Fund and the IIE Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis.

### Syrian Higher Education – Historical Context

Over the last two generations, Syria has experienced a massive growth in higher education opportunities. In part this is a manifestation of the cultural politics and priorities of the ruling Ba'athist party's ideology, which emphasizes literacy, education for women and the development of science and technology fields. Very large comprehensive universities were established in Damascus and Aleppo, with smaller universities in Homs, Latakia and elsewhere. By the turn of the century, over a hundred thousand Syrians were attending university at any given time. The higher education sector also included numerous technical academies, roughly the equivalent of community colleges.

Beginning with the presidency of Bashar al-Assad in 2000, the Syrian government initiated a broad-based series of educational reforms that sought to address concerns about the quality of education and faculty within the Syrian academy and that led to the creation of private universities, most notably the International University of Science and Technology and Qalamun University. Paying much higher salaries

than at the public universities, these new schools attracted many of the country's best educators.

In many ways, university education for Syrians was linked to social mobility and the attainment of middle-class status. The promise of higher education is a critical element of the populist social contract that buttresses an otherwise authoritarian régime. As a consequence, universities are a place of both reward and discipline. On the one hand, the state has used access to university education as a way to compensate loyal segments of Syrian society or to build additional loyalty; on the other hand, groups and individuals perceived as potential opponents of the régime could be denied such opportunities. This appears to have taken place, for example before the conflict, with the adoption of discriminatory policies towards Kurdish students at the University of Aleppo. The concept of reward and discipline is most pronounced in the role of the Ba'ath political party/movement on campus. Generally – though not always – membership in the party is a prerequisite to advancement and leadership on campus for faculty. This is mirrored in the fact that the only officially permitted student organization is the Union of Syrian Students, which is Ba'ath-party controlled.

Political dissent on Syrian campuses before the current conflict was rare and, when it did occur, it could lead to expulsion, harassment by the secret police, imprisonment and even torture; for men it also could result in the revocation of military deferments. For that reason, students generally did not engage in activities that could be deemed anti-regime. Criticism of the régime and dissent amongst faculty was equally rare. Were faculty too open in criticizing the regime, they could face sanction, loss of privileges and termination. In general, Syrian universities are used to produce quiescence and political support and serve in many ways to foster indoctrination; academic freedom in the Syrian academy is nonexistent.

Despite the lack of intellectual freedom, Syrian higher education in the prestigious fields of engineering, medicine and architecture compares favorably with that in other Arab countries. The system efficiently educates and trains large numbers of young people, including a very high proportion of women — it is important to note that all of Syria's universities are co-educational and women make up more than half of the university-going population — to fill positions in government service, education and health care. Syrian undergraduates are often able to complete advanced graduate training at Western institutions. Some Syrian faculty engage in primary and applied research and participate regionally in academic conferences and publications. International sanctions and financial constraints, however, have often limited Syrian scientists' access to advanced research opportunities when compared to their peers elsewhere in the Middle East.



The Conflict and the Universities:  
Children of the Damascus Spring and the Ghosts

While the conflict in Syria began with an uprising in the southern city of Dar'á (March 2011), young people in the large urban centers of the country — Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Damascus — emboldened by the Arab Spring, organized pro-democracy demonstrations, some lasting only a few moments in a kind of political flash mob designed to evade the secret police. University students and recent graduates, especially those with advanced social media skills, were often at the forefront of organizing demonstrations on and off campuses. These young people's confidence and idealistic optimism were built, in part, on the fact that they had no memory of the brutality of the régime of President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, who ruled Syria for over thirty years — and whose most egregious human rights violations included directing the Syrian army to attack the city of Hama in 1982, leaving an estimated 30,000 dead. Instead, they came of age during the very brief Damascus Spring that followed the younger al-Assad's elevation to the presidency in 2000, which saw a moment of political and economic liberalization.

Still, young activists imagined that their calls for modest reform and broader democratization would be welcomed by the younger al-Assad and lead to the kinds of transitions they had witnessed in Tunis and Cairo on al-Jazeera or Twitter feeds and Facebook posts. As middle-class idealists and activists, often from well-respected or "good families," they had little experience with the country's extensive network of secret police, which generally targeted Islamists.

Nothing could have prepared them, however, for the ferocity of the Syrian government's response. Student leaders and their families were harassed by secret police; others were jailed and some killed while in custody. Beginning in the first semester of 2012, students reported that plain-clothes militiamen known as the *Shabiha* (literally "ghosts" in Arabic) were an increasing presence on campus, alongside secret police and occasionally uniformed military personnel. They also reported that their dorm rooms were searched, computers and papers seized, and colleagues arrested. In May 2012, for example, demonstrations at the University of Aleppo led to a government crackdown and four student deaths.

Majid's (not his real name) story is illustrative of how the government turned on middle-class university students who voiced opposition to the régime. He is an urban refugee we spoke with in Amman. From a neighborhood in Damascus' walled old city, Majid was in his second-to-last year at the University of Damascus when he became involved in organizing demonstrations. He reported to us two encounters with the secret police, the first a "conversation" at one of the capital's intelligence headquarters, followed by a two-week period of detainment he described as "*ta-khwif*" or intimidation. In the second instance, which occurred approximately one year ago, following a raid on his family's home during which his computer, ipod, cell phone and library were seized, he was arrested and brought before a military court

where he was accused of the Orwellian crime of undermining “nationalist sentiments in a time of war.” He spent 25 days in the Damascus central jail at al-Adra.

Upon leaving prison, Majid was hauled before the University of Damascus’ ethics committee and summarily suspended from the university. At that time, university students’ mandatory military service was deferred while they were in school. Majid’s separation from the university meant he was now eligible for military service. Had he been inducted, he would likely have faced brutal treatment in the army. His family, desperate to get him out of the country, paid the equivalent of over ten thousand US dollars to secure for him a forged visa, and bribed a guard to look the other way at the Lebanese border. When we met with him, he was completing his studies at a private university in Amman. Majid’s case is somewhat unique in that his family has the financial resources to pay the nearly \$4,000 dollar a year tuition at that private, for-profit institution. Although Majid recounted his tale of detention, suspension, and flight from Syria with calm, he noted that the loss he regrets most is that of his library, which he had built up over many years.

Faculty interviewed by the team, primarily prior to arriving in Jordan, described equally troubling stories about harassment of academics, primarily at Arab International University in the Fall of 2012. In one instance, *Shabiha*, described as “civilians with weapons,” arrived in buses and proceeded to physically assault students. Students and professors were made to stand outside while supporters of the regime within the university identified protesters; they were then reportedly taken away in the buses.

### Checkpoints and Growing Insecurity

As the war itself expanded, especially to the cities of Aleppo and Homs, Syrian students faced increasing security concerns on campus. In late 2012 and early 2013 the University of Aleppo, the University of Damascus and al-Ba’ath University in Homs suffered extensive damage from shells and rockets that caused mass casualties – though students report that active fighting had not reached the campuses. Indeed, despite the attendance of fewer and fewer students and professors, all of Syria’s universities remain open.

During our interviews, it became apparent that asking if a university remains open is the wrong question; rather the more important question is: can students come and go safely from the university? Throughout the areas under its control, the Syrian military has established a vast network of checkpoints. At these checkpoints civilians and their vehicles are searched and their papers examined, and students and faculty can be detained or arrested at the discretion of soldiers, secret policemen and militiamen. Similar checkpoints exist in rebel held areas. Students reported having to pass through multiple checkpoints on their way to the university, adding hours to their journey. Women students in particular expressed concern about personal safety when encountering the soldiers manning the checkpoints. In what appears to be a very recent development, the Syrian government is no longer consist-

ently honoring military deferments and is simply seizing young men when stopped and sending them to conscript induction centers.

Syrian students at Aleppo University in the north of the country and those at the southern branches of the University of Damascus are physically unable to attend university because doing so would mean crossing the front lines separating the Syrian army from the rebels. Recognizing this problem, at least one Syrian private university, the International University of Science and Technology (IUST), based outside Damascus, has moved its classes into the capital and is renting space in a warehouse as a dorm for students who are unable to travel. Nonetheless, IUST's day-to-day enrollment is a mere one-third of its pre-conflict numbers.

Notwithstanding the best efforts of faculty and students, conditions at Syria's universities are declining rapidly; professors and students alike are fleeing and face many of the same basic security concerns. This institutional decline means that more advanced students will have fewer opportunities to take the courses that would allow them to sit for terminal exams. It also impacts recent secondary school graduates, who may still be able to enroll, but are unlikely to be able to attend classes regularly due to the security situation, even when these classes are being offered.

#### University-Age Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Although there are no reliable statistics for Syrian university-age refugees in Jordan, it is likely to be a significant number due to the history of heavily state-sponsored education in Syria. The Government of Jordan estimates that it is currently hosting between 470,000 and 500,000 Syrian refugees, while the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Jordan estimated in late April that there were 448,370.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the exact figure, UNHCR projects that by the end of 2013 Syrian refugees in Jordan will total 1.2 million.<sup>2</sup>

The Syrian refugee population in Jordan is divided into two general categories: urban and camp refugees. The majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan live outside of camps; UNHCR estimates that as of January 18, 2013, over 70 per cent of Syrian refugees are living in urban communities. The remainder of the Syrian refugees live in camps, the largest of which is Za'atari Camp. Located near the border with Syria, the Jordanian Government estimates that it houses approximately 160,000 refugees,<sup>3</sup> making it one of Jordan's largest cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Of these, 393,370 had registered with UNHCR, and the rest awaited processing. UNHCR Interagency Information Sharing Portal, "Syria Regional Refugee Response," available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107> (last accessed May 2, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Agence France Presse, "Syrian Refugee Number to Triple in Jordan by Year End: UN," April 5, 2013, available at <http://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/syrian-refugee-number-triple-jordan-year-end-un>.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR's most conservative estimate places the population of Za'atari camp at approximately 105,523, as of April 19, 2013. However, such statistics are subject to a variety of factors involving

Syrian refugee students in Jordan, whether in camps or urban areas, share a number of common challenges that impede their ability to begin or continue their university studies. Like many refugees, young Syrians qualified to attend university sometimes lack travel documents and/or other forms of official documentation. In addition, many such students also lack documents needed for academic study, such as certified transcripts and official attestations as to the level of education they have completed. The Syrian Embassy in Jordan, which is loyal to the current Syrian government, will not provide services to Syrian refugees, including assistance in obtaining documents needed for academic study. While it is theoretically possible to obtain the necessary documents, the costs are beyond the means of nearly all refugee students in Jordan. Significantly, we met with only one refugee student in Jordan who had been able to secure the needed paperwork from Damascus University, which he did by retaining a lawyer in Damascus. However, most refugee students in Jordan do not have the financial resources to do this, and in any event it requires a degree of stability in Syria lacking in most of the academic centers.

According to a senior Jordanian academic administrator, in the past, the requirement to present academic documentation was waived in Jordan. During the first Gulf War, Palestinian students expelled from Kuwait were allowed to enter universities at the level at which they claimed to have completed their studies. There is, therefore, precedent in Jordan for universities accommodating the needs of refugee students by waiving the requirement of official academic documentation. Nonetheless, students reported to us that although in some cases documentary requirements have been eased, some Jordanian universities continue to require documentation. Since many Syrian refugee students were forced to leave home without this paperwork, failure to waive these requirements creates an effective bar to accessing higher education in Jordan.

Another important challenge facing Syrian students concerns compatibility between degree programs across educational systems. Unlike the Jordanian higher education system, which is based on the American model, the Syrian educational system is based on the French system, with grades based on terminal exams issued at the end of the semester or year. As a result, even if a Syrian student has the necessary paperwork to prove his or her academic credentials, it can be difficult to enter Jordanian universities. In fact, some Syrian refugee students with whom we met complained that their specialized degrees are not offered in Jordanian universities, thus requiring them to switch their course of study in order to continue. A related problem concerns the transferability of Syrian university credits to the Jordanian system. We were told that a maximum of two years credit may be transferred. As a result, students who had nearly completed their academic studies in Syria must repeat a significant portion of their studies. Notwithstanding these challenges, most students

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registration and camp departures, and UNHCR itself cautions they are “subject to uncertainty.” See UNHCR, W16 Zaatari Profile 20130426 (Za’atari Public Health Profile) available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176&country=107&region=77> (last accessed May 2, 2013).

interviewed expressed a keen desire to complete their studies, and a willingness to repeat years of study if necessary.

We found three broad categories of Syrian refugees qualified to attend university: urban refugees with means; at-risk urban refugees; and camp-bound refugees.

#### *Urban refugees with means*

Urban refugees who are able to attend universities generally have external sources of funding. Often, money is received from relatives working outside of Syria, however one student told us that he was receiving help from a group of relatives living both inside and outside of Syria. In general, students attending universities in Jordan were being supported by relatives working outside of Syria (in the Arabian Gulf or Europe). Several university-age students interviewed said they hoped to join their families in the Gulf but are unable to get the necessary visas.

The biggest challenge facing Syrian refugee students with means is the fact that high tuition fees represent a significant barrier to completion of university studies. In that regard, we were told that Syrian refugee students must pay foreign student fees at the public University of Jordan, which makes it nearly as expensive for them as private universities in Amman.

#### *At-risk urban refugees*

Most of the Syrian urban refugees with whom we spoke were “at risk,” in the sense that they lack stable sources of income and struggle to meet their basic needs. Because urban refugees in Jordan are not necessarily concentrated in one area even within a given city, it is difficult to keep them apprised of what limited opportunities may exist. A recent report by CARE shows that urban at-risk households living in four urban centers in northern Jordan have an average monthly shortfall of income to expenditure for basic living expenses of around \$260 (185 JOD).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, for most urban Syrian refugees, university fees represent an unattainable luxury, even if they have some familial reserves. Many of the Syrian students we met exhibited some knowledge of the higher education landscape in Jordan, but were frustrated by the fact that they were unable to access local universities, especially because of financial constraints. Some expressed the belief that educational opportunities are better in Turkey and Egypt, although they did not necessarily have a clear sense of the situation in those places.

The urban Syrian students we interviewed indicated that they have no communal spaces or regular meeting places, which may be partly a function of their dispersal throughout Amman and other urban centers. Several expressed the desire for “*raha nafsiyya*,” or psychological relief, and felt that meeting with other university-age

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<sup>4</sup> CARE Jordan, Rapid Participatory Community Assessment, “Syrian Refugees in Urban Jordan: Baseline Assessment of Community-Identifies Vulnerabilities among Syrian Refugees Living in Irbid, Madaba, Mufraq, and Zarqa,” April 2013 at p. 3.

students could help alleviate their stress. Overall, the students we interviewed exhibited signs of stress and anxiety.

NGOs serving the urban at-risk refugee populations reported that these individuals may be forced to return to the refugee camps when their financial resources are exhausted. Indeed, the cost of living in Jordan, already much higher than that in Syria, continues to rise. Water is scarce, and represents a significant cost. As the heat of summer rises and refugee savings become depleted, families may be forced to return to the camps in order to survive. This could further limit university age students from accessing educational options.

### *Camp-bound refugees*

University eligible young people living in Za'atari camp, located in the windswept desert 80 km north of Amman, appear to have the fewest options for pursuing future study. Za'atari is notoriously under-resourced, and it has been the site of continued refugee-led protests over poor living conditions since August 2012. Recent protests by refugees over camp conditions led to several Jordanian guards being injured, for which eight Syrian men were sentenced for their role in the incident.

Prior to visiting Za'atari, we were told by multiple sources that there are no university age students there, but that it instead houses almost exclusively poor peasant-farmers and urban laborers and their families. We found this to be untrue. Indeed, with relative ease we were able to speak with eighteen students in a single afternoon. While it is not clear how many young people who live in Za'atari have had their university studies interrupted, it is obvious that this population exists. A census of university-eligible camp residents would be extremely useful in determining how large this group is, how best to meet their needs, and the scale of programming that is required.

Syrian student refugees in Za'atari face impediments to continuing their university studies beyond those faced by their peers in the urban centers. In particular, the ability to leave the camp, whether to attend university or for any other purpose, is severely restricted. Moreover, because many of the young women and men entered the country illegally and without travel documents, they face additional obstacles to pursuing their studies. A large number of the students we met in Za'atari arrived as part of a wave of refugees fleeing violence in the late summer/early autumn of 2012. Many lack passports, and indeed many others never had them, since they would only have been obtained if the person had planned to travel abroad. Because the Syrian army controls the official border crossing into Jordan, many crossed illegally before passing into Za'atari. It is worth noting that while in the past, camp refugees could be "sponsored" by Jordanians (also known as the "bailout" system) to leave the camp and settle in urban areas, that appears no longer to be a legal option. Despite the increased restrictions on movement after the repeated riots over living condi-

tions that began in August of 2012, the camp remains somewhat porous.<sup>5</sup> Although it may technically still be possible to leave the camp to attend university classes, this is an unlikely option given the logistical challenges, insecurity and distance from learning centers.

There are very few work opportunities inside the camp for young people whose studies have been interrupted, despite the pressing need for teachers and other skilled workers. Some of the refugees we interviewed have been able to find some work, including one as an assistant teacher in an elementary school. However we were told that NGOs rotate internship-style workers in order to provide the most opportunity to the largest number of people.

In addition to the limitations imposed by the restriction of movement and the lacunae in documentation, young people living in Za'atari whose university studies have been interrupted appear to have little knowledge about the higher education resources available to them. This may be due in part to the fact that organizations aiming to help refugees pursue their educations connect with potential beneficiaries primarily through the internet. Although many university age students in Za'atari have limited access to the internet through the 3G network on their smart phones, internet access on computers is extremely limited.

### The Meaning of the Collapse of the Syrian University System

Although Syria's universities themselves have largely escaped the violence of the civil conflict in Syria, there are notable examples to the contrary, as discussed above. Nevertheless, the infrastructure of the universities remains largely intact. Classrooms, libraries, research facilities have not been the target of violence or looting – and certainly not on the scale of what happened to universities in Iraq in 2003. The collapse is more a problem of human capacity, safety and trust, at least for the moment.

In many important ways, Syria's universities served as the place where a modern Syrian citizenship could be conceived and enacted. On campus, Syrians of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds — admittedly almost all middle class — could mix, establish friendships and imagine belonging to a Syrian polity in ways that even many of their parents and certainly grandparents could not. A striking feature of the collapse of the social role played by Syrian universities was illustrated in our conversations with Sunni Muslim students from al-Ba'ath University just outside the Syrian city of Homs. Located at the intersection of Sunni Muslim and Alawite communities, al-Ba'ath University is one of the few social spaces outside of the military where members of these two religious communities meet. For the Sunni Muslim refugee students we spoke with, they could recall a moment in the conflict, corresponding to the fierce Spring 2012 Battle of Baba Amru, when they became more

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<sup>5</sup> CARE report, p. 7, stating that refugees from Za'atari “often leave the camp both officially through the bailout system (humanitarian cases) or unofficially. According to UNHCR estimates, this occurs at a rate of as many as 300 people per day.”

conscious and aware of the importance of the “difference” between themselves and their Alawite classmates. This awareness was accompanied by fear and distrust. It is unclear if Syrian universities can recover their former role of providing a space where different groups can interact, though the hope certainly remains that they can serve as a platform for reimagining post-conflict Syrian society.

Regardless, amongst the students with whom we spoke, while there was an obvious degree of political consciousness and awareness, we saw very few, if any, clear signs of political or religious radicalization. Helping grow and maintain this political awareness, while preventing radicalization, must be part of any plan to assist refugee students.

#### Looking Forward: Exile, Civil Society, and the Prospects for a “War Against the Intellectuals”

Syrian academics and students in exile are beginning to organize, including using social media and traditional techniques to form exile-based organizations, in order to prepare for their eventual return to Syria. They may also be among the best placed to help meet the needs of university-age refugee populations. Thus far, the two most prominent are the Union of Free Syrian Academics and Union of Free Syrian Students. While the trajectory of these organizations remains to be seen, it may be possible to engage their leadership on issues most pressing to Syrian refugees whose university studies have been interrupted.

Another urgent question concerns whether Syria is on the verge of a “War against the Intellectuals” as transpired in post-2004 Iraq. In the Iraqi case, university professors, lawyers, doctors, and journalists were targeted by militias, gangsters, and even government agents for harassment, kidnapping, and assassination. None of the Syrian academics with whom we spoke indicated that this was happening. That said, kidnapping and assassination is an aspect of the civil conflict. Our assessment is that violence against academics qua academics remains a real possibility in Syria, particularly because of the high correspondence between the professoriate and membership in the Ba’ath Party. A period of “account settling” may take place if the régime itself falls.

#### Expanded Recommendations

- 1) *A broad-based census of Syrian refugee university students should be undertaken in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey that includes both urban and camp-based individuals; a similar study should be made of the needs of IDP university students and academics where possible.*

Among the humanitarian service providers in Jordan, there is little understanding or knowledge of the size, need or distribution of Syrian refugees, aged 18-25, who have had their university studies interrupted. During our research in Jordan, this lack of awareness was underscored by the fact that



aid and higher education officials frequently told us that there are no university students at the Za'atari refugee camp. In fact, contrary to these reports, during our visit to that location we encountered numerous students. Although it is impossible to give an accurate estimate of the student population in Za'atari, it appears to be significant. A census would not only allow for a more accurate estimation, it would also provide an understanding of the composition of the refugee student population as well as an indication of their particular needs. Such a census could also strengthen and bring additional programmatic clarity to existing efforts like the IIE Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis, helping such initiatives to assess the needs of Syrian refugee students more effectively, and to identify those students who have little or no ability to access English-language sources of information that are currently available – for example through the Consortium's web portal.

- 2) *Major funding organizations and donors should engage the Jordanian private and public education sector with a view to developing a consortium that would provide assistance to Syrian refugee students. This could help reach students who have little or no ability to access English-language sources of information.*

Although the cost of living in Jordan and Jordan-based university tuition is out of reach for most Syrian refugee students, at least one senior leader in the field of higher education who is also president of a private university in Jordan indicated an interest in housing several hundred Syrian refugee students at his university. Moreover, he suggested that this could also be the case at other private university campuses. Building a consortium of Jordanian universities around the Syrian refugee student issue may provide foreign donors an opportunity to negotiate reductions in fees, as well as other services and policies that would be advantageous.

- 3) *A program should be developed to help Syrian students travel to other Arab countries, primarily Egypt, with its robust higher education sector and relatively inexpensive living costs, to continue their studies.*

Most of the university students we interviewed expressed the strong desire to complete their studies. This eagerness translates into a willingness to travel to other countries where there are educational opportunities, such as in Egypt, the states of the Arab Gulf, Europe and the United States. Our impression was that there is a real seriousness of purpose among many refugee students and this can be a starting point for designing programs that connect students with opportunities outside of Jordan.

- 4) *Ways for Syrian refugee students to take critical national exams, most notably the high school exit exam, in Jordan or other places of safety should be created by the UNHRC in consultation with relevant educational authorities.*

Students informed us that they had remained in Syria longer than they felt safe primarily to complete high-school graduation examinations or university subject exams. Creating a way for students to take these exams outside of Syria will help provide them with more options to preserve their and their family's safety.

- 5) *In addition to the current practice of supporting visiting academic appointments, IIE-SRF and other groups assisting scholars in peril should collaborate with Amman-based research organizations (for example, the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, the Arab Thought Forum, Columbia University Middle East Research Center) to create short-term, three to six-month research fellowships in Jordan and the MENA region.*

The possibility of Syrian refugee academics finding posts in the Jordanian academy is remote. This has a great deal to do with legal preferences given to Jordanians in the hiring process. One possible option that was explored with the leadership of the Arab Thought Forum is the creation of short-term research fellowships for Syrian refugee academics. Amman is home to several think tanks/research centers that have housed Iraqi academic refugees in the past through the IIE-SRF program. These could serve a similar function for Syrian academics, even on a shorter-term basis.

- 6) *Colleges and universities outside Syria should support Syrian refugee students and academics to continue their studies and academic work through programs like the IIE-Scholar Rescue Fund and the IIE Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis.*

One concrete way to address the problem of Syrian refugee academics unable to work in Jordan or elsewhere is for colleges and universities around the world to partner with organizations like IIE-SRF to bring individual Syrian professors and researchers to their campuses as visiting scholars. In the IIE-SRF case, this would be funded, in part, by a fellowship. This would provide them with a safe environment to continue their teaching and research. Likewise, institutions can join the IIE Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis, which provides an opportunity for the international higher education community to help Syrian refugee students continue their studies.