Excerpt from: *Uncounted and Unacknowledged: Syria’s Refugee University Students and Academics in Jordan*

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

Nothing could have prepared them [student activists], 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 “takhwif” 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.

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

For the complete report, please follow this link:

http://www.academia.edu/3474289/Uncounted_and_Unacknowledged_Syrias_Refugee_University_Students_and_Academics_in_Jordan.

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