Syrian Education and Education for Syrians: A Letter from the Graduate Student Representative

Dear all,

As I am writing this, hundreds of thousands of Syrian students cannot continue their education. This means that they are not only deprived of a safe and secure present, but also of a brighter future. Historian Keith Watenpaugh has shed light on the dire situation of Syrian university student refugees in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. He argues that helping Syrian university students could curb the appeal of militant groups for young people.¹ So far, less attention has been paid to the difficulties students face inside Syria. For one, thousands of students belong to internally displaced Syrians who outnumber refugees by far and currently constitute 6.5 million.² While Syrian student refugees abroad are struggling to access academic opportunities and funding, those inside the country, regardless of whether or not they have been displaced, lack safety and security altogether.³

On the surface, primary, intermediate, and secondary educational institutions are relatively functional inside Syria. However, educational standards have fallen and some of my interlocutors, which included primary and secondary school teachers, reported that exams are no longer monitored as they used to be in some regions. Moreover, the content and form of education has changed in many areas of the country. In Raqqa and Deir al-Zor, for instance, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has imposed its own curriculum by excluding courses on music and art, modifying scientific subjects such as chemistry, physics, and biology in accordance with their own views of the world, and introducing courses on Islamic law and fundamentalist theology.⁴ Since religious subjects serve to legitimize ISIS, they are given primacy over other subjects. Additionally, ISIS imposes its own code of conduct and dress code on students.⁵

In the Kurdish areas the curriculum has mostly stayed intact, though the governing Democratic Union Party (PYD) has introduced Kurdish language instruction. Though this move is a violation of official Ba’th policy, the central government neither supports, nor prevents it. Moreover, the PYD has established separate institutions for teaching Kurdish following 2011 uprising in the Kurdish cities of Afrin, Ayn al-Arab/Kobane, and Qamishli.

Higher education has been affected the most by the on-going crisis. Economic pressures compel many students to abandon their studies and instead to work and support their increasingly destitute families.⁶ Syria’s largest universities are located in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, and Hasaka. Since 2011, most of these cities have suffered destruction on large scales and some are now divided into segregated zones ruled by various rebel and government forces. While these universities are theoretically operational, the lack of security discourages many from physically reaching their universities’ campuses. The proliferation of checkpoints, unpredictable zones of control, and worsening financial constraints have made travelling to cities nearly impossible.

Given these dangerous conditions, some university students simply skip lectures and attend only the final exams at the end of each academic term. This trend is facilitated by the fact that attending classes is not compulsory and does not count towards students’ final grades. Their entire grade depends on how they perform on the final exam. This is especially true for those students who do not live near their universities.

For many, the safest option to reach their campus is by flight. But tickets are beyond the financial means of most people, especially since tickets now cost at least six times as much as they did before 2011. Further, obtaining a plane ticket requires not only money, but also connections (wasta). Trains have...
stopped running for more than two years now. In the absence of trains and the inability to afford flights, the majority have to choose the cheapest but most dangerous option: buses. Where buses are available, costumers must sign up and wait for their turn since the demand has multiplied. Unfortunately, in the rural areas many bus services connecting smaller towns with major Syrian cities have either become rare or have entirely disappeared. Some bus services, according to my interlocutors, pay a fee to whichever group controls the areas covered by the bus route. The lack of transportation and high prices means that students cannot easily return home between semesters. Some may return home every year or every two years, whereas previously they used to return to their families at the end of each semester.

The following account illustrates how perilous a journey can be for students. This spring, in May 2014, a group of a hundred and fifty school children took a bus from Kobane/Ayn al-Arab to Aleppo to take their exams. On the way, they were taken hostage by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. While some of the children managed to flee ISIS wanted to exchange the other children for ISIS hostages captured by the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units). In early October 2014, ISIS released 70 of the students, though they are still keeping more than 30 as captives. Currently, Ayn al-Arab/Kobane is a site of fierce fighting.

Lorin, a second year English literature major at the University of Damascus, has been unable to continue her education for the last three years. Worried about her safety, her family has been preventing her from going to Damascus. They are convinced that young women are more prone to kidnapping than young men and even if she avoids getting kidnapped, they fear that she will be harassed in Damascus and on the way. As the situation remains dire, I have listed a number of resources available for Syrian students who have fled the country and for those still inside. Some of the deadlines for scholarships for this coming academic year have already passed. However, they may represent possibilities for next year. All the links were functional as of October 31st, the last time I checked them. Some links might refer to the same scholarship as some links are intertwined. I did not include descriptions of these scholarships and funding opportunities since they differ in terms of their nature, scope, and eligibility. Finally, it will be much appreciated if our readers kindly circulate the list of resources below on their listservs and websites so it reaches a wider public.

Warm regards,

Kawa Morad
October 2014

List of Resources

Asfari Foundation (It offers several scholarships and fellowships for Syrian students with academic institutions in the UK)
http://www.asfarifoundation.org.uk/news/
CARA (deadline passed)
http://www.cara1933.org/ukp-grants.asp

DAAD Scholarships (German Academic Exchange Service)
https://www.daad.de/portrait/presse/pressemitteilungen/2014/27280.en.html

EU Erasmus Mundus scholarships for Syrian Students
http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/syria/more_info/get_involved/calls/em_en.htm

Global Platform 4 Syrian Students, Jorge Sampaio

IIE Syrian Consortium for Higher Education (the link include the list of universities offering places)
http://www.iie.org/Programs/Syria-Scholarships/For-Students

Jusoor foundation offer several scholarships that vary in nature, including some for refugees

SOAS, University of London, ‘Cultures of Resistance Scholarships’
http://www.soas.ac.uk/registry/scholarships/the-cultures-of-resistance-scholarships.html

The AmidEast Hope Fund Scholarship (deadline passed, BA level, particularly for Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon)
http://www.amideast.org/lebanon/academic-and-cultural-exchange/hope-fund-scholarship-syrians

The Swedish Study Institute Scholarship (MA level, up to 30 scholarships, academic years 2014/2015 and 2015/2016
http://studyinsweden.se/scholarship/swedish-institute-study-scholarships-for-syrian-students/

UK Government Scholarship, Chevening Award in Syria (Deadline, Nov 15th, 2014)
http://www.chevening.org/syria/

University of Birmingham, Scholarships for Syrian Refugees
http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/International/students/country/Syria/schols-syria.aspx
  a. Said Foundation (in coordination with Said Foundation)
http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/International/students/finance/scholarships/saidfoundation.aspx
  b. Islamic Development Bank (at the U of Birmingham)
http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/International/students/finance/scholarships/ibdscholarships.aspx

University of Cambridge (Global Leadership Scholarship)
http://www.global-leaders.co.uk/what-is-global-leaders/

Link to application
http://www.global-leaders.co.uk/application-form/?scholarship=Jusoor-Cambridge+Leadership+Scholarship
University of Edinburgh (Deadline passed)
http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-funding/postgraduate/international/region/syria

US Department of State, Tomorrow’s Leaders Scholarship Program (Syrians, refugees and otherwise)
http://damascus.usembassy.gov/resources/tomorrows-leaders-scholarships.html

United World Colleges (UWC)
http://www.sy.uwc.org/how-to-apply

References


