Tuyoor al-Amal and Informal Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon

Mustafa al-Haj, with Beverly Tsacoyianis

Many of our readers already know that Lebanon, a country of fewer than 6 million people, has reached a breaking point in its capacity to host the almost 1.2 million Syrian refugees that have streamed into Lebanon as a result of the horrifying civil war in Syria these past three and a half years. What many of us may not know is that Mustafa al-Haj, a Syrian graduate of the University of Damascus (BA, 2010) and refugee, is the co-founder and principal of Tuyoor al-Amal (lit. “Birds of Hope,” a name the children picked by voting) an elementary, junior high, and high school desperately reaching out to US, European, Lebanese, and other countries’ media, individuals, and NGOs like Relief International to cobble together funding that will keep the school afloat. They currently have about 70% of their operating expenses for November and December 2014 covered. It is almost overwhelming to contemplate how much money goes into running a school where students, parents, and local government cannot afford more than roughly $20 a year per child. This year, only about 75% of the families were able to afford to pay $20 per child, and there were 700 children at the start of this year (twice as many as when they opened the school last year,) so they started with only $10,000 of the $14,000 they had expected from school fees. As of the middle of November, 2014, enrollment had increased to a total of 1,000 students. The school survives largely on charitable donations.

For example, a Kuwaiti NGO recently (on November 8, 2014, in fact) came forward to cover (very modest) salaries for the teachers for the 2014-2015 year, which was a small miracle and hugely beneficial. Just a few weeks ago there were for this school year 25 employees for 700 children, but in the past week Mustafa managed to convince the building owner (where a private Lebanese school rents for the early part of most days) to rent out 8 more classrooms to the Syrian refugees, so they now have a total of 25 classrooms. This allowed enrollment to increase from 700 to 1000, and they still have to turn many families away because they don’t have enough space for more children. Luckily the last 300 students they enrolled this week (bringing the total number of students to 1000) each brought the $20 for one year of schooling. This extra $3000 covers less than one month’s rent for the 25 classrooms. And there are lots of other things to add in: not just renting the classrooms, but renting busses, purchasing schoolbooks, and hiring bus drivers, for example. Mustafa recently told me that they have the rent paid in full for November and December, but they still need to pay for January to May 2015. It costs nearly $4,000 a month to rent the 25 classrooms of the building, and $300 of that goes just to the guards on the first daily shift outside the building. That’s the shift that watches over the school while Lebanese children attend classes in a separate school system. The Syrian children aren’t even there for that part. The school needs six busses a day to shuttle their thousand students back and forth from their (temporary) residences in Deir Ammar, Jabal al-Baddawi, and other nearby towns to the school. It costs $550 per bus per month. With six busses, and seven more months of school (they hope to hold classes until July 2015,) that is $23,100. And at 1000 students, the school has nearly tripled in enrollment since it first opened in November 2013, when they had only 17 classrooms and 350 students.

Some of the needs of the school are being met thanks to dedicated fundraisers and teachers in the United States. In “Drawing a Boy’s Hope: An O.C. woman shows a Syrian child how to create and heal amid civil war,” published in the California-based Orange County Register, by Theresa Walker March 28, 2014, Walker goes into some detail about the American connections behind the school’s founding in November 2013. Sama Wareh, an artist, environmentalist, and humanitarian based in the Silverado Canyon region of Orange County, California (near Los Angeles) holds an MS in Environmental Education from Cal-State Fullerton, and is community outreach coordinator for the Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach. She has roots through both her parents in Syria, and has played a major role in supporting the school from conception to realization. Wareh, as Walker notes, “helped open the school and started an art therapy program to help the schoolchildren express their feelings about the violence that
has torn apart their homeland.”iii Some of Wareh’s fundraising and publicity for the school has even gone into documentary filmmaking; her 40 minute documentary about the school film was screened in her community in California.” And thanks to her efforts in California, Wareh managed to bring with her to Syria a number of backpacks for the children. There were 350 children enrolled the year Wareh brought those backpacks. Now there are 1000.

What follows are excerpts from three of Mustafa’s more recent dispatches from the field, where he is co-founder, principal, and senior headmaster of the Syrian refugee school al-Tuyoor al-Amal based currently in Jabal al-Baddawi, north of Tripoli, Lebanon. These excerpts have been edited and revised for publication in the Syrian Studies Association Bulletin by Prof. Beverly Tsacoyianis. Mustafa was very clear that we could use his real name, and that while these dispatches refer to the most important factors, there are a lot of others he did not mention. His goal is to give us “a good idea about the schooling for our children and the situation of their parents” that has emerged as a tragic consequence of the Syrian civil war. He is trying very hard “to open more doors and fix as many problems as possible.” For Mr. al-Haj, “[i]t's not an easy mission but it's still the least I can offer for Syria. If we fail to rescue this generation, [we] will be the greatest losers.”iii

Dispatch from Aug. 29, 2014iii

“It’s my pleasure to tell you about what's going on with my schoolchildren and the educational process in Lebanon. You might see in my email that is lengthy; but I wanted this e-mail to be a sufficient response for your inquiries. I want to post the e-mail on my website so it can be shared and exposed to all people who would be concerned and help support the educational process for Syrians refugees in Lebanon. In these very difficult circumstances in the Middle East, it's very clear there is not a very big difference between Syrians, Lebanese and the neighboring countries in that the ghost of war is everywhere.

The following are details of conditions in which our children are living: First, covering expenses of daily is extremely difficult for Syrian refugees, especially since more than 70 percent of the refugees are children and women. The effect on adults that are grieving, suffering and in chronic need is very clear in the traumatized behavior of the Syrian refugee children. Many other traumas are affecting our children and their parents and disrupting all facets of life in this very small country of Lebanon. Second, each stage of childhood development is showing distressing levels of maladjustment. Most of children in the school have found that schools are a shelter to escape from their residences, which are dreary houses or basements that become like a grave for them. There are social adjustment issues among the children in that most Syrian children don't have friends to spend time with except when they come to schools. The family structure has been destroyed: most of the children have either lost both their parents in war or they are living far away from their father, mother or some of their other emotionally significant and nurturing family members. This means that even when the children are around each other, the happiness that could be shared is lost because of those other personal losses weighing on them. Third, most of male children drop out of schools to find work to help their families. Fourth, there appear to be psychological disorders in some of the children who are most emotionally scarred by their memories and experiences of war. This is visible in some of their art therapy sessions. Fifth, most of the children arriving in Lebanon have lacked steady and safe schooling for many months or years, some for as many as three years (since the civil war began) as they could not afford the expensive enrollment fees for many of the schools. Sixth, I can see very clearly that there is a higher and more serious form of violent behavior among the children who arrived most recently from Syria, or who have been out of school for the longest periods of time. This is an unfortunate result of the lack of access to the emotional and intellectual outlets that good schooling can represent for child refugees. Seventh, there is a general malaise and feeling of hopelessness among the older students, who feel their ambitions and hopes for the future to be halted or frustrated. Especially for the students from age fifteen to eighteen there are very few programs for teens in this age, and most search for jobs and set aside their ambitions and dreams for after the war's end. Lastly, many students fear for the future.
In Lebanon there are two curricula taught to Syrians, and I have experience with both of them. The following details important points about the formal education system in Lebanon, which UNICEF and the Lebanese government support financially and with staff. Through my long experience I can summarize the disadvantages of this system: First, the language instruction in French or English presents difficulties for Syrian refugee students, who studied in Syrian schools in Arabic. Second, most of the Syrian refugee students who enrolled in this system failed to pass their exam to move on to the higher grade for 2014. For example, the students couldn’t pass a simple test in languages to be enrolled in a school where all the subjects are taught in a foreign language. Third, some Lebanese families are racist toward the Syrian families, and mistreat Lebanese children who spend time with the Syrians of the same class. This is possibly a result of the political tensions of the past, when the Syrians army occupied parts of Lebanon for many years. Fourth, the Lebanese teachers care less, and most of teachers are working with Syrian refugee students as a second job. Fifth, they teach only for the age groups of 6 to 14 years old (which leaves out the increasingly despondent group of 15 to 18 year olds.) Sixth, there isn’t any real supervision or day to day oversight by some of the NGOs that sponsor the Lebanese programs. Seventh, there is no clear plan for the Syrian students in the Lebanese programs. Most of the NGOs seem to care less for the Syrian students than the Lebanese, and their teams are dealing with that in a kind of trade-off. Eighth, the Lebanese schools feel threatened by the number of Syrians refugees, which are beginning to exceed the number of Lebanese students in these classes. According to one UNICEF report, over 450,000 Syrian children have fled from Syria in the past three years. Ninth, UNICEF is spending huge amounts of money in vain for the NGOs working with the Lebanese school system, considering the maladjustment of Syrian refugee students to their system. Tenth, collecting the proper documents and legal papers for the students registering is extremely difficult for the refugee children. If you want to register one of your children in a Lebanese formal school you have to follow a lot of difficult bureaucracy. Refugees that fled to Lebanon have little to no proper documentation with them, and they can rarely afford to amass the correct paperwork to register their children or the children that have arrived with them.

The Syrian curricula, however, are a form of informal education in Lebanon. These are similar to curricula in refugee areas of Jordan, Turkey, and inside Syria that have many advantages for our children over local formal education systems. First, the Syrian curriculum supports a genuine link between our children and their schools. Second, most of the Syrian refugee parents prefer it to the Lebanese one. Third, the teachers are qualified for elementary and high school instruction, and they themselves are Syrian refugees who fled their home with their own children. Fourth, most of the Syrian teachers (who are themselves in utmost need of paid work) agree to be volunteers or to take whatever level of salary when (usually meager) funding is available, unlike the Lebanese teachers who have very high salaries paid by international NGOs to teach Syrian students. Fifth, UNICEF does not support Syrian curricula (or any informal curricula for that matter) in Lebanon. Sixth, Syrian refugee parents are involved with our educational process, and find it very easy to adjust to, unlike the Lebanese school system which presents language difficulties due to its use of Lebanese dialect and French. Seventh, our school is for Syrian refugees of all ages, from 6 to 18 years old, and our materials support students at their level. Eighth, we must rent space from wherever is available, usually from more expensive Lebanese private schools, since we are not allowed to teach our curriculum in the formal education system where classes are allowed in the Lebanese public school buildings. Formal Lebanese schools can't be used for teaching Syrian refugee students unless the Lebanese minister of education agrees to it. And even if the minister agrees that means only the formal education is allowed. It is forbidden to teach a Syrian curriculum (or indeed any sort of non-approved) at a Lebanese state school. That means our options are extremely constrained, to the point that refugees have the choice of either private schools or learning centers like the Tuyoor Al-Amal building. Ninth, all the staff and students have the same vision: they are thinking of how to end the crises and get back to their homeland, and they complete their study with that vision. The schoolwork therefore links students with Syria and gives them a context for aspiring to return. Tenth, unlike the Lebanese one the Syrians curriculum is cheaper to run. Eleventh, outside of Tuyoor al-Amal but nearby in Lebanon
there are some local NGOs that are supported by Gulf donations, and by some concerned generous people worldwide who support education, but this can mean little to no international supervision or oversight. The most dangerous effects of this kind of support for education is that it allows for some religious or political NGOs or people to force their agendas in our children's life. Tuyoor al-Amal works to combat this.

Between the two curricula (the formal Lebanese and the informal Syrian in Lebanon) our children are distributed and lost, and most of them fear for their future. The big question for the children and their parents now if the school is in cooperation with other schools and educational systems. After my long experience with Syrian displaced children I see that solving their problem isn't so complicated and not very hard. The answer is in my comparisons above. All we need from the international NGOs is to participate and engage Syrians in solving this set of problems. Unfortunately, the UNHCR is paying a lot of money to other projects in vain. For example, last year (in 2013) I was able through my school to support education for 350 students in Syrian curricula and I also enrolled 300 students in a Relief International-supported accelerating learning program as rehabilitation for them before they enrolled in the Lebanese school system. In both schools I had the same staff position. In comparison between the two, I can say that the results are widely disparate. Unfortunately, financially speaking, two months of spending from the international NGO Relief International was equal to the entire (8 month) cost of the 2013-2014 school year in the Syrian program. And educationally, in terms of student learning and achievement, the results in the Lebanese system were much less positive than the results in the Syrian one.

The very rich heritage and deeply rooted civilization of Syrians has been destroyed for four years, and all the humanitarian efforts have failed to stop the genocide of Syrian people. It would be great news if the US president and his government would be serious in their promises this time.”

Mr. al-Haj recently completed a summer session for 300 Syrian children and has had to fight for the funding to keep the school open for this current 2014-2015 academic year. “To work in such [a] field and under such situations means I have to be a real warrior,” he notes, “and it means I have to deal with stress and pressure affecting my life, but I am still fighting for what I believe is right. I'm not involved in political issues, I am not so involved in political views. Rather, I work day and night to keep the doors of schools open.”

*Dispatch from September 14, 2014*

“Day after day more and more difficulties accumulate, obstructing our path. Less than two weeks ago I completed a summer session at Tuyoor al-Amal School, during which many challenges and obstacles confronted me. I am going to write a short blog on our school website about what happened during that period soon – but the most important issue is that the person who rented us the space for our Tuyoor Al-Amal school last year came to the school while it was in session and asked the staff and students to vacate the building. This was crazy. He was under pressure from some corrupt clerics and others who wanted to corrupt the name of the school and misuse it for their own benefit. As a result, we were forced to move the school from that building to another one in other region. Anyway, with the summer session barely completed, the lease contract for the current Tuyoor al-Amal's school building will end at the beginning of November, meaning that I must now endeavor to find an alternative solution.

Over 450,000 Syrian refugees students in Lebanon are struggling to attend school this year. This was the unexpected news that I received when I called the local Tripoli office for UNICEF in Lebanon a few days ago to ask about the future of the refugee students this year. I also learned that only 35,000 to 40,000 of these students will have the opportunity to join the formal Lebanese school system for this year, while the vast majority - over 410,000 students - is expected to be left with no option but to drop out of school.
I told you previously about the accelerated learning program run by Relief International, the NGO I am working with. They called me last week and asked me to register a further 500 students between six and fifteen years old. Only three days later, more than twice this number - over 1,200 students - arrived at the school with their parents for registration. These are only the students from the town where I am currently living and the very nearby towns. You can imagine the number! With Relief International’s support I can enroll up to 500 children in this program, so I am struggling to find schools for the remainder of the children. It is a massive responsibility, but I pray that Allah will give me more power to achieve it. I met the children’s parents during the registration process. Their fears for their children’s futures were clear as they told me: “We heard about you and we heard about Tuyoor al-Amal School Sir! We trust you to save our children's future.” Most of the parents said something of this nature.

I was surprised at the number of the people who arrived specifically for our school registration in the past three days alone, even when there are other NGOs running similar programs closer to their areas. There is no question that they came here to seek out our special program, because as a fellow Syrian I know their pain from first-hand experience.

Dear Beverly, you might think that I am exaggerating, but I assure you I have been sick for many days. The reliance of so many people on me is not an easy burden. It distresses me immensely to see the children’s parents begging for a spot in classes for their children, and to watch the children themselves who come with their parents after being out of school for three years. This is in addition to concerns for the students who should be attending secondary school but have had to drop out to work. There is effectively no high school in Lebanon for Syrian refugee children. Can you imagine this disastrous situation? All of these factors and many others have affected me tremendously. I hope that now you have some idea about the situation here. In your last email you asked me many questions; hopefully the above answers will be sufficient to answer them satisfactorily.

On your question about why UNICEF doesn't send us aid: UNICEF doesn’t support the informal "Syrian curricula" system with anything. Their rules prohibit any Syrian from working with them or with the UNHCR in Lebanon in any capacity but voluntary work. This is in contrast to the Lebanese UN personnel who receive high salaries. I have often called their regional offices to inform them about our needs, and their answers were always politely dismissive, along the lines of “You are doing a great job, but we can't support you since we follow the rules of the country we are in.” They are not directing any part of my program, simply providing encouraging but useless words. In conclusion, UNICEF barely covers any of the needs of the massive numbers of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. UNICEF never supports informal education.

On your third question: The parents of our enrolled children try to pay even when they have only extremely limited funds to spare for the school. The parents pay an annual tuition fee plus monthly transportation fees; for instance, Tuyoor Al-Amal’s annual tuition fee last year was $33 per child for the whole year, with an additional monthly fee of $10 for transportation. Note: Last year half of the students’ parents were unable to pay these fees, with only 50% paying them. Compared to the other informal schools in Lebanon which run the Syrian curricula though, Tuyoor al-Amal was the cheapest in Lebanon. Some other schools took $300 per a child for the whole year. However, every school’s funding system varies depending on what monies they receive from the concerned donors and active local charities.

On your fourth question: Informal education teaches the Syrian curriculum that was taught in Syrian schools inside Syria under the current formal education system. The subjects of Math, Science, English, Social Studies, Arabic, Sports (Gym), Religion, Art, Physics, and Chemistry are taught to students from the first to eighth grades. Outside these core subjects, curricula can vary, with those schools funded by Gulf nations’ donors, for example, attempting to impose more religion classes, etc; when donors come to
visit these schools the children have to raise the flag of the particular donor’s homeland and sing patriotic songs about it…

On your fifth question: Schools that run the informal education system have not instituted programs for psychosocial support, unlike the UNICEF funded- NGOs elsewhere like Save The Children, War Child International, Concern, etc. All of these NGOs have a special program for healing child trauma. Tuyoor al-Amal School is the only informal school in Lebanon to have instituted an art therapy program like the psychosocial support programs in those NGOs. The art therapy program that Sama Wareh presented for us at the ‘For The Unseen’ event was introduced at the school on November 9, 2013. The program was the first opportunity for our kids to express themselves artistically and represented a new means by which the children could find a safe outlet for their experiences as a means of enhancing their self-esteem and awareness.

On your sixth question: As I have mentioned in my report, all the monies and funds by international NGOs go to support formal education and psychological activities, not informal ones like our school. All Syrians, including intellectuals and academics, are categorized as refugees without any right to work for the UNHCR, UNICEF or any other international NGO. For this reason we are wholly reliant on our own abilities to resolve our own problems as best we can. Note: I am working with Relief International not because of their admiration for my academic or other qualifications but because they know extremely well that none of the kids will follow their program if I am not with them in the area.

On your seventh question: I have through my own efforts built a working relationship with most of NGOs and a direct relationship with the UNICEF office in Lebanon. Currently, I am working with "RI" (Relief International). I’ve had my own experiences with them since February 2014.

On your eighth question: Based on last year's costs, where every child cost us about $33 or $34 per a month, that is $277 per a year, with costs covering things like transportation, paper, pens, crayons, textbooks and exercise books, teachers' salaries ($400 per month per teacher,) renting space for the school, and various other expenses for the school through the year. This amount applies for students of various ages, with a very slight difference especially for the oldest kids.”

Dispatch from November 8, 2014

“Just a few days ago while returning home from school, I happened upon a crowd of Lebanese people screaming horrible and racist words against the Syrians in the area. The mob broke into many Syrians’ houses, terrified the children, and insulted the women. As a result many families felt unsafe, and left their houses to find new temporary shelter elsewhere.

Syrians in Lebanon are living in very difficult circumstances. They suffer from unemployment and poverty, and many lack even the most basic and routine access to clean water, food, warm clothing, and safe shelter. Even the ones who find work, a place to live, and sustenance suffer from the mistreatment of host country residents. I myself experienced the rejection of Lebanese neighbors personally, and mine was among the families pushed to leave our temporary residence. I and my family hope to settle down close the new school, but even there, where I have rented space for the coming days, I received a lot of threatening phone calls and people have even approached me on the street more than once to intimidate me and warn me against staying in their suburb.

I had to adjust to all of this, and stay focused on my mission to educate this lost generation, because of my deep faith that education is the medicine through which the human heals all of these diseases. I feel I am completing my mission and I have overcome many adversities and challenges to do it.

My struggling to start Tuyoor Al-Amal’s school for this 2014-2015 year didn’t go in vain. (In late August
and early September our classes had been pushed out of one building because the landlord was under pressure from Lebanese clerics to get rid of us.) But I worked so hard to find a building we could use and finally I found it. That was on the fifteenth of November, 2013. College International has 25 classrooms, and the school runs for Lebanese children in its first shift. The building owner accepted to rent to us 17 of the classrooms, on the first and second floors, to be the nest for our little birds this year. Tuyoor Al-Amal which means birds of hope had started classes officially on November 20, 2013. Although responsibility of running the school seemed very huge on me, my deep faith in the sacredness of education for all children of the world and my trust in myself pushed me to set aside my worries and the pressure I was under. “Hope” is the key word in which I can open all the closed doors in my life.

However, choosing a new qualified team for the 2014-2015 school year and setting the standards for my school was my first priority. Four days were enough for me and my great team to finish the first step of registration for 700 kids. Three hundred and fifty of them are returning students from our first year, 2013-2014, and we doubled the number this year. I have depended on the parents to pay the equivalent of $20 per a child as a tuition fee for the whole school year. In a country like Lebanon twenty US dollars is a very easy amount for Lebanese families to come up with for education. But only 75% of the Syrian refugee parents could pay this much for their children. That 75% of 700 students at $20 per student brough in ten thousand dollars, which was good enough to pay the school rent for October, November, and December 2014. The cost of renting the school building is $2900 a month (this amount includes $300 for the guard who protects the school in the first shift, when only Lebanese students are there, not Syrian refugee students) and to pay the bus drivers’ salaries for October and November. I have receipts for these large expenditures. The really positive news came recently when I assigned a contract with an NGO of Kuwaiti charitable schools today (November 8) after I met with them and they sponsored the teacher salaries for this year. I have 25 employees in Tuyoor Al Amal school. The expected salary for each one of them is $300 USD, which is the amount the Kuwaitis sponsored. Also the school building owner donated to our 700 children uniforms, so each child has their own now. I consider this (the teacher, guard, and bus driver salaries, and the school uniforms) 70% of the school’s financial needs now covered. But I still need to come up with the rent for our school building for the months of January, February, March, April, May and June 2015. The expected number for this is ($2900/month for 5 months or 14,500 USD.) Also I have the bus driver salaries for December, January, February, March, April, May, June and July to cover. I have 250 students who need bussing to get to the school, and I have five buses for them. The salaries of the bus drivers are $550 per bus. The expected budget for the buses is the following: 5 buses at $550 each is $2750 per month, and 2750 per month for 7 months is $19,250. I have also to cover the cost of 700 backpacks (one per child at $13 per bag) which costs $9,100.

Dear friend, unfortunately the disastrous situation is so clear in the area, I am trying to solve part of this huge catastrophe. Right now after I’ve assured about Tuyoor al-Amal that everything is working properly. I have turned into those who couldn’t enroll some children at the school because of the limits of the school. I am looking for alternative places for those children I have to turn away. Perhaps I can find a way to run another school or to find a solution for them. Tens of parents come to my school every day, entreating me to find a place for their children. Anyway I will update you when I am able to take this next step on what to do with those children.

I wish if I had more time so that I may write in English and work more on the website but you can imagine how little time and resources I have for that! I have a friend who is an information engineer who is very talented. He designed software in which he made my work more organized. I will post that online soon, where all the information about every student is available online in addition to online photos showing every pupil. You can follow the school’s Facebook page for photos and more updates.
Beverly, forgive my detailed email but I wanted through it to update you with the most important steps until now. I hope that my above fragmented notes are helping me convey part of the truth. I am typing now while my eyes are semi-closed after my long exhausted day.”

The above dispatches distill the most important information about Mustafa al-Haj’s project to instruct and develop the future of Syria in the form of the hundreds and hundreds of Syrian refugee children whose families and friends seek out his specially tailored curriculum because they can see how beneficial the art therapy and other classes have been for these young girls and boys. Beverly Tsacoyianis, former book reviews editor of the Syrian Studies Association, had the pleasure of meeting Mustafa al-Haj in Damascus in 2010 when she was the Syria Liaison for the SSA while completing her dissertation fieldwork using funding from the US Department of Education’s Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad funding award. When they met, Mustafa was completing his BA in English literature at the University of Damascus, and waiting tables at one of the high-end cafes in the capital to help make ends meet. After Beverly returned to the United States to finish her PhD, she and Mustafa lost touch for a few months. But in his quest to fundraise for his school, he managed to track her down on LinkedIn last year, and she is thrilled to find in Mustafa’s hard work a promising emergency stopgap measure for the trauma of the current Syrian civil war: Tuyoor al-Amal, an elementary, junior high, and high school that Mustafa al-Haj co-founded with the California-based Syrian-American artist, humanitarian, and environmentalist Sama Wareh, and that Mustafa now runs for Syrian refugee children in Jabal al-Baddawi north of Tripoli, close to their former location Deir Ammar. (The building they formerly rented in Deir Ammar is now operating another school using the same name, Tuyoor al-Amal, for Syrian refugee children, but it is run by “religious men who tried their best to corrupt the school last year and they hired the building for this year to use the same name” of the school, according to Mustafa al-Haj. xi)

The school relies almost entirely on the donations of regular people to stay afloat, and they welcome more donations. Mr. Mustafa al-Haj is also available to answer any questions potential donors may have about the school’s curriculum, teachers, staff, and students. He can be reached at Tuyooralamal@gmail.com and through the school webpages at http://www.tuyooralamal.com/ and on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/tuyooralamal. American friends of Tuyoor al-Amal (including Sama Wareh, Lomax Webb, Lina Kurdi, and Naziha Wareh) have worked hard in the United States to raise funds to wire to Mustafa’s Lebanese colleagues via Money Gram and Western Union. (Mustafa informed me that Syrian refugees have a great deal of difficulty trying to set up bank accounts of their own in Lebanon, so they are working through organizations like the NGO Relief International and other local groups with accounts in the country. Beirut businessman Muhammad Monsour has been a major ally to the school’s administrators, and his financial support has kept the school afloat on several critical occasions.) xii And only this week, Mustafa informed me that harassment against his family has worsened; after several Lebanese made threats on the lives of Mustafa’s family members, they have decided to move yet another time, to a new temporary residence closer to the school in Jabal al-Baddawi. xvi As an American citizen, a researcher on Syria, and a child of an immigrant to the USA myself, it breaks my heart to hear Mustafa’s painful testimony of the racism, harassment, and physical intimidation he and his loved ones are facing as they struggle to help young Syrian refugee children navigate their new host country. The pressure on these administrators is enormous, and their only comfort is in the knowledge that they are, in some small way, helping to improve the lives of the refugee schoolchildren who walk through those classroom doors each day. Another comfort is knowing that they are not alone.

There are a number of research and advocacy initiatives that individual members of the SSA support, such as the Institute of International Education’s collaborative project with University of California Davis on studying the impact of the war and refugee crisis on Syrian university students and scholars. xvi It is my hope that members will also support this Syrian university graduate Mustafa al-Haj, who put his own scholarly ambitions on hold to create a school out of nothing, and dedicated himself to the care of these
hundreds of young Syrian girls and boys, who need – more than anything – a safe place to heal, grow, and learn.

Mustafa al-Haj received his undergraduate degree in English from the University of Damascus in 2010. He escaped Syria just after he was called up for military service, after the war began in 2011, and en route to other parts of the world he saw the immense pain and difficult conditions of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. So instead of continuing his escape, he decided to stay in Lebanon to help set up a school for hundreds of refugee children. He is now in the midst of plans to open a second school to cater to the needs of hundreds of more children his school has had to turn away for lack of space and funds, as long as funding for this first school of 1,000 students comes through.

Beverly Tsacoyianis received her PhD in History from Washington University in St. Louis in 2014. She works on social and medical history, and her dissertation was on psychiatric and vernacular forms of healing in twentieth-century Syria and Lebanon. She met Mustafa al-Haj while on a research trip to Syria in 2009-2010. Beverly edited this article for clarity and added some background information, but the majority of the content of the article (especially the dispatches from August, September, and November 2014) is Mr. al-Haj’s dedicated, sleep-deprived, passionate work.

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ii Personal communication, Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Nov. 19, 2014.


iv Walker, “O.C. woman turns Syrian drawing from blood to blooms.”

v Personal communication from Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Nov. 19, 2014.

vi The following is a lightly edited (for grammar and clarity) personal communication, from Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Aug. 29, 2014.

vii The following is a lightly edited (for grammar and clarity) personal communication, from Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Aug. 29, 2014.

viii This is a very low estimate, in fact. The UNICEF Crisis Report “Syria’s Children: A Lost Generation?” for the first two years of the war, using data from March 2011 to March 2013, noted that “half a million refugees are children,” and numbers have only increased since that report’s most recent data is now more than 18 months old. See http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Syria_2yr_Report.pdf, last accessed November 17, 2014. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) recently reported that there are now 5.5 million children (both internally displaced in Syria and abroad) affected by the crisis in Syria, and more than 3 million Syrians have been displaced to neighboring countries like Lebanon. See http://www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria. Last accessed November 17, 2014.

ix The following is a lightly edited (for grammar and clarity) personal communication, from Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Sept. 14, 2014.

x For information on Sama Wareh’s project to help bring “For the Unseen” to the Tuyoor al-Amal School’s children, and to see some images and text about various projects at the school, including how Mustafa and other staff helped build the art room for their art therapy work, see their December 2013 report “For the Unseen,” by the school’s art director Omar Sheikh Deya, available online at http://www.tuyooralamal.com/for-the-unseen.html. The webpage also includes an April 2014 report by art director Omar Sheikh Deya with a showcase of some more recent artwork and music projects. See also the video (professionally edited with inspiring instrumental and rock music) on their Art Room Project, available on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTEsNlxFUyI. The video includes footage of the buses, several teachers, many students, American artist and humanitarian Sama Wareh, and school
principal Mustafa al-Haj. For more on the For the Unseen non-profit, see their webpage at http://www.fortheunseen.org/about/

xi The following is a lightly edited (for grammar and clarity) personal communication, from Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Nov. 8, 2014.

xii See Mustafa’s blog posts about several incidents of this nature with Lebanese landlords of buildings while he struggled to find a place to put the school, at http://www.tuyooralamal.com/mustafa-alhaj. Last accessed November 17, 2014.

xiii Personal communication, Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Nov. 19, 2014.

xiv Personal communication, Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Nov. 19, 2014.

xv Personal communication, Mustafa al-Haj to Beverly Tsacoyianis, Nov. 19, 2014.

xvi See for example Keith David Watenpaugh, Adrienne L. Fricke, and James R. King with Christ Gratien and Seçil Yılmaz, “We Will Stop Here and Go No Further: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Turkey,” (Institute for International Education, October 2014) as well as IIE reports (available at www.iie.org) from May 2013, “Uncounted and Unacknowledged: Syrian Refugee University Students and Scholars in Jordan” and June 2014 report “The War Follows Them: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Lebanon,” for the admirable and exhaustive efforts of our own SSA president, Prof. Keith David Watenpaugh, in cooperation with James King of the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund. As noted in their 2014 report, their research in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey and the refugee crisis on higher education “aims to provide policy and program recommendations for use by governments, multilateral agencies, international NGOs, donors, universities, and other institutions, with the overall goal of improving access to higher education opportunities for displaced and refugee Syrian university students and faculty”(1.)