The unheard voices
At-risk Syrian academics in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey

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The Syrian refugee crisis has been one of the most significant exodus crises since the World War II (Ayvazoglu et al., 2021, p. 99). Worldwide, Syria occupies the first rank in the number of refugees (6.6 million) and internally displaced persons (5.6 million) (UNHCR, 2021). The global response to the surge of Syrian refugees has focused on addressing their most immediate needs, such as shelter, food, primary medical care, and primary education, whereas other critical issues, such as higher education and the situation of displaced Syrian academics, remain understudied. Very little is known about the personal experiences and professional trajectories of scholars who left Syria following the start of the conflict in 2011. This is particularly true for those scholars who resettled in neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.

Tigau (2019) has related the lack of research in this field to the difficulty of collecting data in times of conflict and displacement. Another reason has been attributed to the small number of displaced academics in comparison with the overall number of displaced and refugee groups. Hence, the main attention has been devoted to the education of the young generation from primary to secondary schools (Štrajn, 2014), leaving the situation of displaced scholars unaddressed (Salehyan, 2019, p. 146).

This chapter intends to narrow this gap by providing a cross-country comparison of the situation and professional pathways of displaced Syrian academics in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. It is based on an original survey comprising responses of Syrian academics living in the three countries. The survey data are complemented by personal encounters and observations of the author, who has lived and worked in exile after leaving Syria.

The following sections provide a review of the forced displacement of Syrian academics, present the conducted survey, and contextualize the findings. As a point of departure, academics are defined as PhD and MA degree holders who, before leaving Syria, were instructors at public or private universities and colleges accredited by the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education. The chapter concludes by offering recommendations to international support organizations for at-risk and displaced scholars.

Forced Displacement of Syrian Academics

With the outbreak of the conflict in Syria in 2011, disruption started to greatly impact the entire educational landscape. Syrian academics were targeted by most of the armed parties to the conflict. The universities suffered from "politicisation, militarisation and human rights violations" (University World News, 2019, p. 1). Academics were assaulted, threatened, kidnapped, assassinated, or detained by the regime (Matthews, 2013). Confirming this, Pherali and Millican (2020) reported that "a large number of academics have been either exiled or killed; any research that existed has almost disappeared and teaching has been disrupted by absenteeism, lack of resources and limited numbers of experienced faculty members" (p. 6).

Among those who lost their lives during the early years of the conflict were Dr. Mohammad Alomar (October 2, 2011); Dr. A'ws Abdul Karim Khalil, nuclear physicist (September 2011); Brigadier General Dr. Nael Al-Dakhil, academic director of the Military Chemistry College (September 2011); Dr. Eng. Muhammad Ali Aqil, professor at the Faculty of Architecture at Al-Baath University (September 2011); Dr. Mahmood Tasabihji in 2012 at the Faculty of Medicine; Dr. Colonel Suheel Shahin and his colleagues at Al-Assad Academy for Military Engineering (September 2012); Dr. Ilias Issac, professor of agricultural engineering (September 2012); and Dr. Khaled al-Asaad, scholar of antiquities and Aramaic culture (August 2015), to mention only a few.

Assassinations of academics were reported in Aleppo and Homs (Matthews, 2013). Some scholars were beaten and dragged off to prison by security forces in front of their students (McLaughlin et al., 2020). According to Matthews (2013), Syrian universities were used as detention centers, while both staff and students were targeted. Freedom of expression or academic criticism of the political, security, and social situation was

forbidden. Academics and students alike were frequently reported by their colleagues, students, or intelligence members who were "planted" in every lecture room. As a result, many academics were dismissed from work and imprisoned or went missing (Masud, 2018). At the same time, students and scholars staying abroad were stranded, had dwindling funds, and could not return to Syria.

The conflict has led to massive losses of both research expertise and higher education infrastructure (University World News, 2019). A substantial number of Syrian academics have left the country. There are no concrete figures or accurate numbers, but according to CARA, an estimated number of 2,000 Syrian academics fled the conflict when it began (Beall & Lonsdale, 2019, p. 5). Confirming this, Al-Ibrahim (2016) stated that the number of Syrian academics employed at the five public universities was about 7,500 professors, and the number of those who left the country as of 2016 was about 2,000. He added that around 500 professors were internally displaced in the liberated areas. Furthermore, hundreds of PhD students at Syrian public universities, who were appointed as full-time instructors, mostly went abroad or were also internally displaced (Al-Ibrahim, 2016).

An official at the Ministry of Higher Education stated that more than 60% of Syrian academics had left Syria by the end of 2017. This has led to a significant shortage in faculty members, making departments function at a capacity of less than 40% (Sputnik, 2017). Echoing this, the president of Aleppo University stated that more than two-thirds of the faculty members had left the university (Sputnik, 2017).

In response to the massive exodus of scholars and intellectuals and to prevent further emigration, in 2014, the Syrian regime suggested considering academics who left the country (irrespective of the reason) as having resigned, and promised to put them on trial once they returned. In a meeting held at Damascus University in 2014, the president of the university called academics who fled the conflict traitors of their country (Enib Baladi, 2014). This, however, has only added to the insecurities experienced by scholars, and the large-scale emigration of Syrian academics continued, leading to the fragmentation of the Syrian higher education system and its near collapse (Al Hessan et al., 2016; Masud, 2018).

Despite the fact that there is an increased global awareness of the importance of higher education, Syrian academics receive only limited support from the international community (Parkinson et al., 2020). The most prominent academic institutions and networks that have offered help to

Syrian academics include the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), an international Scholars at Risk network (SAR), the British NGO CARA, the French Programme national d'aide à l'Accueil en Urgence des Scientifiques en Exil (Programme for the Emergency Reception of Scientists in Exile, PAUSE), and, recently, the Mellon Foundation through funding a fellowship for Syrian academics at the Columbia Global Centre in Amman. Yet, since the scale of the tragedy is so immense, the support offered to Syrian academics is far below what is needed.

Starting a new life in exile brings new challenges, which Syrian academics had not necessarily anticipated before they left, such as the reality of being (perceived as) refugees. Having escaped the war and resettled in other countries, many Syrian academics do not accept being identified as refugees because it strips them of practicing their agency and reminds them of "being rootless, stateless and rejected" (CARA, 2019, p.78). In their eyes, the international system labels refugees with this title to comfort the host country citizens and to indicate that the newcomers are less competitive than locals, and that they are vulnerable and need assistance. Thus, the relationship of those receiving the refugee label in host communities is not based on partnership, collaboration or shared experiences; rather, it is based on the feeling of inferiority. As one Syrian academic, interviewed by Pherali (2020, p. 94), put it:

> [A]refugee is a downstream labeling. When you get this label, you automatically become inferior. Wherever you are, whatever you do. You are second to the counterpart. It does not matter being an academician because being a refugee already makes you a less worthy person.

The refugee label violates all other social and professional identities an academic has. It is a dismissive term that does not embody their self-respect and dignity. Therefore, many displaced Syrian academics try to avoid registering with the UN refugee agency, the UNHCR, and receiving a refugee ID card, or if this is unavoidable, they keep it secret, so that they are not seen as inferior to other academic colleagues.

Mass displacement of Syrian academics, scientists, and intellectuals has exacted heavy tolls on Syria, not only in terms of the loss of human capital, but also on the destruction of the intellectual life of the Syrian community. At the same time, in many cases, it has contributed to the intellectual and scientific life of the host societies, and to the academic transformation and internationalization in the academic environment of the host institutions

(Elsner, 2017). However, as this study found, this was not the case for Syrian academics, as they were often unable to continue their careers due to legal restrictions, economic conditions, language barriers, psychological trauma, or unrecognized qualifications (Parkinson et al., 2020, p. 185).

The survey

This study aimed to generate a better understanding of the current professional situation of Syrian displaced academics living in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. To that end, an original survey was developed for and conducted among Syrian academics in the three countries, asking about their experiences in exile. The questions focused on various aspects of life, including their employment status, and whether they have benefited from any professional development programs or research opportunities in the host countries. Most importantly, the survey concentrated on the following issues: work-related challenges experienced by displaced Syrian academics in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, their employment prospects, and support programs for displaced scholars.

The total number of respondents comprised 126 academics, including 113 males and 13 females. As for the distribution of qualifications, 90 participants were PhD holders and 36 master's degree holders. In terms of academic rank, 19 academics were full professors, 20 associate professors, 44 assistant professors, and 43 lecturers. As for host countries, 71 respondents resided in Turkey, 38 in Jordan, and 17 in Lebanon.

Notably, the number of female respondents was significantly smaller than the number of male respondents, which reflected the respective gender gap existing in academic faculty employment at Syrian universities before 2011. This gap was the result of cultural factors which do not encourage higher education of females, and the Syrian Education Ministry's policy of promoting education and career development for men, which created an extremely unfair competitive environment for female academics versus their male colleagues.

Responding to the survey questions, 70.6% of the participants indicated that they did not have a job in their country of exile. However, the current employment varied considerably according to their academic rank. For example, 12 full-professors out of 19 (63%) mentioned that they were employed, and only two associate professors out of 20 (10%) indicated that

they had a job. As for assistant professors 34 out of 44 (77%) do not work, and 35 out of 43 (81%) lecturers revealed that they do not work.

Overall, full professors (males) had considerably better chances of finding employment in their countries of exile. The data further revealed that out of 90 PhD holders, 61 were not employed whereas only six out of 34 master's degree holders declared that they worked, which in neither case did not necessarily mean that they worked in the academic sector. When asking the participants if they had benefited from any professional development program since they left Syria, 67% responded positively, whereas only 11% obtained fellowships or support for a research stay.

When asking the participants about the reasons for not being employed, the common answers from Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey were the lack of opportunities and having a refugee status, which implied legal constraints in the job market. The latter was a particular challenge in Lebanon and Jordan, where Syrian refugees are largely denied access to white-collar jobs. As for participants based in Turkey, the challenges were at times related to the government's policies, which one would have expected to benefit displaced scholars. Thus, the Turkish government granted citizenship to some Syrian academics and highly qualified Syrian intellectuals, which one would assume could open new doors for academic career development. However, this had an opposite effect on the scholars' work status. Suddenly, they were treated as local academics, and their work contracts previously signed under the status of displaced scholars were terminated immediately after receiving Turkish nationality. They then had to be enrolled on the job waiting lists for the local faculty. Another challenge was related to the language barrier in both Turkey and Lebanon. Turkish and English are the languages of instruction in almost all disciplines at Turkish universities, a skill many Syrian academics lack. In Lebanon, academics were required to teach in English and French in as well as Arabic. So, in addition to political, economic, and security concerns, language differences became a serious obstacle.

When answering the question concerning their future career prospects, all the participants responded that the current lack of opportunities affected them negatively. Some stated that, with the lack of current employment, their academic qualifications were deteriorating and their knowledge was far from being updated, and two respondents, in a fit of despair, questioned why they had studied and got their PhD in the first place. Even those who were employed in the higher education sector saw a limited potential for further

development of their academic careers in host environments that were rarely, if ever, supportive of their academic promotion.

Finally, when asked to offer suggestions to international support organizations for at-risk and displaced scholars, most of the respondents emphasized the need for assistance with creating job opportunities, fellowships, access to libraries, collaborative research partnerships with foreign academics, capacity building, and intensive English and Turkish language courses. In answering the final question about adding extra information, they all called for urgent and immediate help. They felt that they had been forgotten by the international community.

Contextualizing the survey findings

Overall, the situation of Syrian academics in exile was not what they had expected when they left Syria. Their qualifications were not valued in the job market. They were often perceived as a threat to local academics who, at times, acted in a quite hostile manner, for instance, in Jordan by publicly requesting to "Jordanize" the higher education sector. The challenges faced by Syrian academics in exile ranged from political, social, and financial issues to legal constraints pertaining to their refugee status. Contextualizing the above survey findings, this section provides a broader picture of the differences across the three host countries and the respective support programs in place.

Syrian academics in Jordan

Prior to 2011, Jordan was the biggest "importer" of Syrian scholars. Syrian academics were paid generously, and many inducements and facilities were offered to them, including the possibility of teaching for two days a week and returning to Syria. They were perceived as rare experts, and the university that attracted the largest number of Syrian academics would attract the biggest number of students. Syrian academics were considered competent intellectuals who participated in building the Jordanian higher educational system.

However, after 2011, this situation gradually changed. This could have been related to various factors, including the fact that hundreds of Syrian academics had arrived in Jordan, which made the supply in the job market much bigger than the demand. Jordanian academics started considering

Syrian counterparts as a threat, not as an added value. Consequently, calls for Jordanizing the higher education system increased. The situation worsened after some Gulf countries' universities terminated contracts with many Jordanian academics due to economic factors after 2016.

Lack of job opportunities and financial support, soaring prices, and the inability of their children to enroll in public schools from 2013–2015 led a significant number of Syrian academics to leave Jordan. They moved to Turkey, Europe, and the Gulf countries when visas were still available for Syrians. Thus, the number of Syrian academics at Jordanian universities has gradually dropped, along with their salaries, starting from the 2016 academic year onwards. According to official information released by the Jordanian Accreditation Corporation, the number of Syrian academics who worked at Jordanian universities from 2017–2021 has decreased gradually from 63 in 2017–2018 to 20 in 2020–2021.

Furthermore, the work permit fees for Syrian academics increased in 2019 from $10 to $3,600 based on Decree Number 2019/290 (Jordanian Ministry of Labor, 2019). This financial burden can be seen as a message to Jordanian universities to end hiring of non-Jordanian academics. Most Jordanian universities required the Syrian academics to pay for their work permit, or to share half the payment with the university, in addition to the late payment fine. It is worth mentioning that the Syrian academics who sustained their jobs were either full professors or associate professors, whom the university could not replace with a Jordanian academic in the same specialty or the same academic rank. In 2021, this number has decreased as more Syrian academics 'contracts have been terminated. Currently, displaced Syrian academics have even fewer job opportunities in the Jordanian academy, and thus, support by international organizations will be critical in assisting them in finding positions (Watenpaugh et al., 2013, p. 6).

Syrian academics in Lebanon

Prior to 2011, Syrian academics were able to work as part-time faculty members at Lebanese universities, getting all the support needed to obtain work permits and sometimes even being able to work without them. Many taught at Syrian and Lebanese universities simultaneously. However, things changed dramatically after 2011 and Syrian academics found it difficult to get jobs and faced social, political, and legal obstacles. According to Reisz (2014), the situation of Syrian academics and students in Lebanon is generally bleak.

They face "severe resource constraints and physical threats, [and] unwritten discriminatory policies make Syrian students and academics vulnerable to exclusion from higher education in Lebanon due to unwritten discriminatory laws" (Watenpaugh et al., 2014a, p. 13).

When trying to complete their residency permit in Lebanon, Syrian academics must sign a pledge at a public notary stating that they will not work or apply for work in Lebanon, as noted by the academics who participated in the study. Therefore, the legal impediments to employment play a decisive role in finding jobs in Lebanon. The process of obtaining work permits is burdensome and very seldom successful (Bidinger et al., 2015, p. 45). The presence of Syrian military troops in Lebanon for a period of 29 years, from the beginning of 1976 until April 2005, and the indirect control of the Syrian regime of all decision-making processes to date have created hostility toward hiring Syrian academics in Lebanon. In addition, as suggested by Watenpaugh et al. (2014a), the primary challenge Syrian scholars face in the Lebanese job market is "exacerbated by their generally weaker English and French proficiency compared to their Lebanese counterparts" (p. 26).

Furthermore, the complex Lebanese political situation dramatically affects the labor market. Syrian scholars and academics, who oppose the Assad regime, fear the ability of the Syrian intelligence to reach the Lebanese universities to capture them (Reisz, 2014). Administrators at several Lebanese academic institutions are afraid to hire any Syrian academic who possibly opposes the Assad regime, either because they support the regime or because they fear political trouble. If an academic is hired, they must sign a pledge that they will not be involved in any political activity inside or outside the university, as reported by most of the Syrian academics who participated in the survey for this study. They also have to agree not to discuss any political issue during the courses they teach, which clearly violates principles of academic freedom (Watenpaugh et al., 2014a).

Syrian academics in Turkey

According to the UNHCR (2020), Turkey has accepted the largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide, more than 3.6 million, including the largest number of Syrian academics. The Turkish government estimated that 1000 Syrian academics resided in the country in 2016; this included only PhD holders (İçduygu & Millet, 2016).

Despite the fact that the Turkish government allowed the appointment of Syrian academics in Turkish universities, the challenges and restrictions they faced were enormous. For example, like other Syrian refugees, Syrian academics were not allowed to travel outside Turkey. Also, they were prevented from taking certain paid positions due to their temporary refugee status (İçduygu & Millet, 2016), or because they could not teach in Turkish or English languages, or they lacked the necessary official personal documentation (Ammar, 2016).

Other challenges included academic equalization of their master and PhD degrees, which at times took years. Also, in cases where they did not have an official copy of their certificates because they had fled the war without bringing these, the Turkish Ministry of Higher Education could not hire them in Turkish higher education institutions, or issue work permits to them. In addition, the decentralized nature of Turkish higher education, a situation exacerbated by language barriers as Turkish is the main language of instruction (Watenpaugh et al., 2014b, p. 5), deprived many Syrian academics of the opportunity to teach at Turkish universities. Due also to a lack of language proficiency, they could not work in international study programs where English was the main language of instruction. However, academics whose specialties were Arabic language or Islamic or theology studies were offered job opportunities because the language of instruction was Arabic. Currently, requests to establish universities that teach in Arabic to accommodate displaced Syrian students, and provide teaching opportunities for Syrian academics have increased. Moreover, the Turkish government established departments at seven universities, where the language of instruction is Arabic. Additionally, Gaziantip University started BA/BSC and postgraduate programs in Arabic in 2015 (see also Hünler in this volume).

International support

Responding to the needs of the Syrian academics in Turkey, CARA's Syria Programme (CARASP) focused on three strategic components: English for academic purposes, research incubation [visits], and academic skills development (ASD) (Parkinson, 2018, p. 7). The first two were clear, but very little information was known about the type of academic development the Syrian academic participants needed to receive from CARASP. Therefore, CARA started gathering information through surveys and interviews to

inform subsequent actions. It mobilized financial support and provided English language courses, in addition to some programs that aimed to develop their proficiency, such as "CARA Syria Programme E-Learn Soiree Sessions" which continue to the date of publication of this text. These programs provided Syrian academics and highly qualified Syrians with training in research methods curriculum design, and offered them "academic space where Syrian colleagues were able to disseminate their work and continue engaging in academic activities" (Pherali & Millican, 2020, p. 4). In addition, they facilitated channels of academic collaboration with colleagues in the UK, who have supported CARASP, and Syrian academics in authoring joint research papers, or reviewing their papers and helping in the publication process.

Despite this support, many Syrian academics in exile are facing dire circumstances and considerable challenges to continue their career; this includes psychological collective traumas, visa issues, accreditation problems, lack of financial resources, and isolation from scientific communities (Parkinson, 2018, p. 7). Only individual Syrian academics currently living in Turkey and some of those living in Jordan can benefit from such programs as those offered by CARA. Overall, the findings show that the academics based in Turkey received the most support in terms of professional development programs and English classes. In contrast, support for Syrian academics living in Lebanon and Jordan has been extremely limited. For instance, in 2020, the Mellon Foundation offered a 12-month fellowship program for displaced scholars, in which only one or two Syrian academics based in Jordan could join. Many could not apply for it due to the English language requirement and the focus of the fellowship on social sciences. In general, because most support programs and fellowships for at-risk scholars are based on English, this dramatically limits the number of Syrian applicants.

Furthermore, acceptance criteria for such support programs are often difficult for Syrian scholars to meet. Thus, they are only eligible to apply for the IIE-SRF program during the first three years after leaving their home country. Moreover, many Syrian academics who moved to neighboring countries learned about the existence of these programs too late, months or even years after arriving in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey. In addition, these criteria do not take into account that displaced scholars need time to settle in with their families, go through security procedures in host communities, look for schools and jobs in different academic institutes, try to equalize their

credentials, and look for official personal identification cards, so time passes, and the three-year condition for applying for IIE-SRF is not met.

Compared with refugee academics based in Northern Europe, who might be considered fortunate given their personal agency, extended cultural and social capital, and access to basic services, as well as a greater range of support networks (Pherali, 2020, p. 88), the situations for refugee academics in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are completely different. In these countries, displaced Syrian academics often struggle to survive. Those who are registered at the UNHCR are classified as less vulnerable, so they are often exempted from much of the support provided by this organization. However, they share with the rest of refugees limited job access and spatial mobility and as noted by Pherali (2020, p. 88), "political freedom and uncertainty around their futures are similar to general refugee populations who are stuck in camps or host communities."

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the difficult situation of displaced Syrian academics in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. The findings of the study indicate that there is a lack of support for Syrian academics in the three countries; however, the Syrian academics in Turkey are in a somewhat better position than the others. They also show that each country needs more direct international responses, according to the country-specific situation. However, national and international responses should be discussed with the target communities, namely, the displaced Syrian scholars themselves, to reach the optimal goals.

It is worth mentioning that humanitarian organizations, such as the Norwegian Refugee Council, have conducted studies about the livelihood of Syrian refugees. Such studies have been conducted with the help of academics in the host countries; however, Syrian academics are rarely consulted or involved in preparing such researches. For example, several studies have been conducted in Jordan and Lebanon to explore the educational needs of the Syrian refugees, or their livelihood, but none of these studies engaged Syrian researchers. They always depend on other nationalities to speak on behalf of the Syrians rather than asking Syrians to play an active role in the studies. Engaging Syrian academics in these educational and research activities would help advance their careers, provide them with a source of living even if

temporarily, and provide the field of studies with more accurate and authentic data relevant to the Syrian situation.

Support networks and programs such as PAUSE, CARA, SAR, and SRF, as well as universities worldwide, could play more critical roles by sponsoring job opportunities, online teaching, fellowships, research projects, and partnership programs with host universities in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Providing access to libraries and databases, and offering professional development programs, in addition to English for academic purposes courses, would be of great benefit for displaced Syrian academics.

Notably, most countries refuse to grant entry visas to Syrian academics to attend conferences or join postdoctoral fellowships. Such actions diminish their international academic values and prospects for knowledge sharing and exchange. Promoting international research collaborations would help Syrian academics overcome the isolation of exile and bridge potential skill and knowledge gaps. Engaging them in capacity-building programs in host countries would ultimately help them to rebuild the higher educational system in Syria once they have the opportunity to return.

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