

## Syrian Refugees Higher Education Crisis

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### Introduction

The Syrian conflict which started in 2011 has resulted in the displacement of millions of Syrians, extreme loss of life, and societal and physical destruction. Since the start of the war in Syria, an estimated 4.8 million Syrians have registered as refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and North Africa, and approximately 1.17 million have applied for asylum in Europe (Luo and Craddock 2016). One of the most serious consequences of this massive displacement is a “lost generation” of students—i.e., students who are without the financial means or institutional access to continue their education (Watenpaugh 2014). When the conflict is over, Syria’s ability to repair itself will be severely impacted by the dearth of educational opportunities within the country as well as the extremely limited access to education outside of Syria for university-age refugees.

Without question, higher education is of tremendous importance in post-conflict societies. Many feel that higher education should be given high priority along with addressing the physical needs of refugees. Keith David Watenpaugh (2014), the lead author of an important work on Syrian refugees' students and scholars in Lebanon, states that “the war will end but the young people instrumental in re-building the country will fall behind” (p. 1). He argues that educating these youths will give them a stake to reconstruct their war-torn country. His report identifies the barriers Syrian refugees are facing and he proposes educational outreach by non-governmental organizations and a collaborative effort by the universities in north America and Europe to build a relationship with the universities in the host countries of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

In a policy briefing at Brookings, Doha center, Sultan Barakat and Sansom Milton (2015) report that

higher education acts as a catalyst for the recovery of war-torn countries in the Arab world, and will not only supply skills and knowledge to re-build the physical infrastructure and the shattered economy, but also can help with the restoration of the collapsed governance systems and fostering social cohesion. Efforts to educate the young people will equip them with knowledge and skills to rebuild their nations (Barakat and Milton 2015, p. 1). Barak and Milton (2015) also argue that the severe toll that regional conflicts have taken on higher education is further exacerbated by a failure to recognize the strategic role of the sector in stabilizing and promoting the recovery of war-torn communities and states.

### Barriers to Providing Higher Education to Syrian Refugees

While providing higher education to the generation of Syrian refugees who are college age is of paramount importance, there are many obstacles to reaching this goal. Although neighboring countries, such as Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan have accommodated millions of Syrian refugees', in general, the international response has been unwelcoming. While the US and European Union have been blamed for not doing more, the Arab world’s wealthiest Gulf states have taken no Syrian refugees in at all (Open Source 2017). In the opinion of this author, the priority of the international community has been to safeguard their own borders and to offer aid to meet the physical and basic needs of the Syrian refugees in other host countries. Therefore, providing higher education by the international community is viewed more as a luxury and not as a necessity.

Other obstacles include lack of funding to educate the Syrian refugees, political tensions in the host countries, lack of identification documents or academic transcripts to enroll in the universities, and lack of

language skills to attend universities outside of Syria. For example, in Turkey, Syrian refugees need to learn Turkish to pass the university entrance exams or attend the universities. In Lebanon, knowledge of French/English is needed to enter the universities as Lebanon has a distinct higher education system divided between French and American-patterned higher education institutions (Loo and Magaziner 2017).

One huge hindrance to having access to education in general and higher education, in particular, is the rise of global nationalism. This has further increased the support of far-right parties in Europe due to fears that the wave of refugees may lead to fewer jobs and more terrorist attacks (Massaro 2016).

### **Efforts to Enroll Syrian Refugees in Universities in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan**

Since the host countries of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have made significant contributions in receiving the majority of the Syrian refugees and providing access to higher education, it is worthwhile to highlight their efforts in this article.

Although Turkish higher -education institutions have struggled to adjust their admissions processes for incoming Syrian students, with few administrative staff members speaking Arabic to transfer Syrian course credits to Turkish ones, many universities, like Bahcesehir, are proactive about enrolling Syrians. According to IIE's report (2014) based on findings in Turkey, Syrians face the added challenges of navigating the decentralized Turkish higher-education system and obtaining proficiency in Turkish or English to participate in courses at the university level. They also struggle with lack of or incomplete documentation and ability to transfer past credits (Bonessi 2016).

In spite of all the obstacles facing Syrians in Turkey, their enrollment in the higher education institutions has dramatically increased recently as the government of Turkey has committed itself to expand the Syrian educational opportunities (IIE 2014).

In 2015, three universities were proposed in Turkey to meet the needs of the Syrian refugees. Zakat University was founded by the Zakat Foundation of

America—a Muslim foundation—and takes its name from the third pillar of Islam, referring to systematic charitable giving (Plakett 2015). Zakat university's academic programs are offered in Arabic. Offering programs in Arabic language facilitates learning and removes the language barrier to enter Turkish universities. In the same year, Turkey and Qatar announced ambitious plans to establish a Turkish Qatari University in Gaziantep province to serve the Syrian refugees there. The announcement also stipulated that it would help to foster scientific cooperation between Turkey and Qatar—although the form and extent of that cooperation was not explained. It seems that the proposed university is still in the planning stages, with the Turkish ministry of education looking for potential land to give to the project. The Middle East Peace University was proposed by the Turkish entrepreneur Enver Yücel, who called for a network of university campuses designated for Syrian refugees to be built in Turkey's border cities close to the Syrian frontier (Magaziner 2015). He also proposed employing exiled university professors in the refugee camps to work at these universities. The project remains at the proposal stage as no progress has been reported since it was proposed (Plackett 2015). Since it is expected that Syrians stay in their host countries for an extended period of time, the cultural integration becomes more of a necessity. Therefore, the idea of Syrian-only institutions may not be the best solution which could potentially alienate students in their new environment (Magaziner 2015).

In Lebanon, the overwhelming majority of Syrian university students and scholars especially Syrian young women, are not continuing any form of higher education or advanced training; in addition, many are facing continued security concerns, as well as popular and official discrimination. The influx has placed new pressure on already scarce resources and created resentment against Syrians (IIE 2014).

Language barrier is an obstacle to enter Lebanese universities as students need to take tests of English or French language to pass the university entrance exam to attend universities. Financial constraints coupled with a lack of institutional aid such as scholarships, all has contributed to the low enrollment of Syrian refugees at the Lebanese higher education institutions (Gutten 2014).

The situation in Jordan is no better than Lebanon for the Syrian university-age students and scholars. The preliminary report by a multidisciplinary research collaboration between the University of California, Davis Human Rights Initiative and the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund that took place in Jordan (IIE 2013) on the status of Syrian refugee university academics and students, revealed that while Jordan has contributed a great deal of support and humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees and has generously provided Syrian refugees with a high degree of human security and safety, the country is facing increasing economic, environmental, and social pressures. Consequently, Jordan has increasingly become an inhospitable location for refugees.

In addition, since the tuition, fees and the cost of living in Jordan are all much higher than in Syria, continuing education at a Jordanian university is out of reach for all but a small elite of Syrian refugee students; most universities in Jordan treat Syrian refugees as international students and charge them higher fees (Al-Hawamdeh and Al-Ghali 2017). As it appears, in general, of all three major host countries to Syrian refugees, Turkey with its large size, robust economy, and relatively stable political situation presents a favorable situation in comparison with Lebanon or Jordan (IIE 2014).

### **Alternative Options to Make Higher Education Accessible to Syrian Refugees**

One alternative to physically attending universities is the on-line model of higher education for the Syrian refugees. A research study based on interviews with 178 young Syrian refugees in the three major host countries of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan revealed that on-line teaching/learning is unappealing as the Syrian refugees culturally prefer one-to-one instruction. The interviewees also expressed that self-motivation, time management and maintaining momentum would be difficult in the chaos of camp life. In addition, many female interviewees from this study who lived in the refugee camps in Jordan expressed high interest in campus life and learning as they felt that the traditional classroom/campus learning would free them from the

imprisonment of camp life. They found that mode of learning more enjoyable than learning on a computer (Bothwell 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Without any doubt, investing in higher education is imperative to transform post-conflict societies, particularly in the Middle East. It is also important to provide the student -age refugees with high quality and accredited higher education to enable them successfully to integrate into their new homelands and re-build their home country once the peace is achieved. This calls for international cooperation and collaboration for the protection of academic institutions in times of war and increased university networks to promote academic solidarity world-wide.

The international academic community must put their efforts together to come up with sustainable solutions that enable the Syrian refugees to pursue higher education to become productive members of their societies whether in or out of Syria. Such solutions to make the higher education accessible to Syrian refugees could potentially prevent and lower the likelihood of youth joining violent organizations and possible radicalization. Syrian youth are vulnerable to recruitment of radical groups if they are not provided with a protective environment and opportunity to education (Al-Hawamdeh and Al- Ghali 2017).

In addition, the international community, specifically the oil rich GCC states of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman must take responsibility to help with the Syrian refugee crisis. As it appears, so far, they have been hesitant to allocate financial resources or assist with the Syrian refugees' resettlements in the Gulf states (Open Source 2017).

Unfortunately, many challenges exist in the path to success for Syrian refugees' university-age students; one of the most deterring is the rise of global nationalism especially in Europe. Such sentiments in Europe could potentially threaten refugees' access to free social programs such as free education. The far- right parties in Europe accuse migrants of abusing the welfare

benefits, stealing jobs, and threatening the local's national identity (Masasaro 2016). It is not surprising that in both Germany and Austria for example, the far-right parties won big for the first time in decades in the 2017 elections. Those parties vehemently oppose the countries' immigration policies in the face of the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe.

In spite of all challenges, it is hoped that the international community realizes the necessity of providing higher education to the refugees in general and particularly to Syrians. Providing higher education helps the ambitious and talented Syrian university -age students to begin new productive life elsewhere or to return and rebuild in a post-conflict Syria.

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