

Displaced Syrian academics: unheard voices in academia

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Multi-layered support is needed for displaced academics to be able to participate in academia and to be heard as academics in their own right – not only as displaced academics.

Syria has endured a conflict of almost 11 years, resulting in 6.8 million people having been displaced from Syria. This situation has generated an enormous amount of research – and research funding – into almost every part of these displaced individuals' lives. One area that has received scant attention, however, is the experiences of displaced Syrian academics globally. While research is therefore exploring the lives of Syrian refugees, it is not necessarily being conducted by or with those best placed to understand their dilemmas.

Stories shared by displaced Syrian academics in Europe and the Middle East illustrate how having a subordinate position in host countries impacts their participation and voice in academia and beyond.

This article draws on in-depth narrative interviews conducted between October 2021 and January 2022 with four displaced Syrian academics in different contexts.

Academia in exile

Various narratives of marginalisation and isolation from academic communities emerged from displaced Syrian academics. Many spoke of not having their skills and experience recognised (as is regularly observed with displaced populations) but also, more painfully, of having their level of qualification undervalued. They felt that they were generally seen as less qualified than 'local academics' in host countries, which resulted in them having lower positions and

statuses in contrast to what they would have in their home country. Amina, who is based in Germany, described not being accepted to work there despite her qualification as a highly experienced university lecturer in Syria: "I am psychologically affected because whatever position I apply for, whether it suits my qualifications or not, all I get is rejection!"

Others spoke of being excluded from academic communities because they are unable to speak the relevant language, which in turn is connected to other forms of racist discrimination. Adam, who is based in Turkey, explains: "Here, you frequently hear the phrase 'You, foreigner!'. Even now with my Turkish citizenship, this affects me. I was always looked up to by my students and colleagues, but this is no longer the case". Similarly, Sami recounts his inability to publish his manuscript in Turkey because of the requirement to use English to disseminate his research: "The main reason for not submitting publications nor getting published is my English which is not perfect, and the same applies to the majority of Syrian academics". As the dominant language for publications is English, displaced Syrian academics may be denied opportunities to disseminate their research unless they are given dedicated time and support to learn English.

Displaced Syrian academics also brought to light experiences of alienation and exclusion from the academic world in terms of knowledge production and dissemination. They spoke of how dominant theories and knowledge produced in Global North countries seem to be the norm and gain more attention in academia than knowledge produced in the Syrian context. Bazikh, who lives in France, stated: "All of the articles I have published so far were accepted by university journals in Syria as the international journals that I sent them to did not like the content and quality of my work". Local or Global South journals inevitably have far smaller readerships.

The current challenges faced by displaced academics globally, including Syrians, stem from a variety of factors including the interruption of their academic careers, the

lack of recognition of their qualifications and documents, deskilling, psychological stress, difficulties in adaptation to a new society, limited employment with low pay, language learning barriers, bureaucratic constraints, and isolation from the academic community. Amina, comparing her precarious non-academic job with her previous position as a university lecturer in Syria, stated that: "It is a very uncertain job and does not give me security at all. [...] At the same time, it is the only route I have to earn some money". Sami describes the challenges of policies dealing with refugees and foreign nationals: "As there is no equivalence of qualifications here in Turkey, many displaced Syrian academics are not conducting research, or they are only teaching, which can affect skills over time". In addition to these difficulties, displaced Syrian academics occupy precarious positions because of two major constraints: the ability to move freely and the lack of funding and support.

The ability to move

Being unable to move freely is a dominant constraint encountered by displaced Syrian academics as their development opportunities and needs are impacted by mobility constraints that differ from international academics who can often move more freely. Government policies on displaced persons' mobility are a major concern for displaced Syrian academics; their ability to participate in conferences and other academic events may be dependent upon being granted a visa, which may be difficult to obtain. Some countries, such as Qatar and the UAE, do not even allow entry to those who carry the label 'refugee'. It is noteworthy that the ability of academics to gain academic positions or promotion, or to obtain recognition within their field, comes through participation in international talks and networking at conferences and events, and the ability to secure these opportunities is considered a marker of academic prestige. Displaced academics may end up with CVs that lack such activities, which may disadvantage them from getting permanent academic positions. Nowadays, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a switch

to online events has facilitated attending different events and activities, and provided an inclusive environment for participation. However, it is unknown how long this will be the case. Those committed to supporting displaced academics should consider always having options for online participation.

On the other hand, some academic activities and projects require longer stays in a different country (such as having a postdoctoral position or joining a research project team) and this can be complicated and risky for displaced Syrian academics. Displaced academics may have to forfeit their right to residency and other advantages in their current host country if they spend a certain number of days abroad. Bazikh explained how French citizenship would allow him to seize academic opportunities without being concerned about issues of residency and mobility. He says: "I have been waiting for French citizenship to be able to move freely to different countries. Carrying this [Syrian] passport now would literally take me nowhere!".

Funding and support

The precarity of the academic job market, including short-term and low-paid contracts, is particularly detrimental to the careers of displaced academics for three main reasons. Firstly, many displaced Syrian academics are displaced with their families and are the sole or main breadwinner, and having short-term contracts may prove financially insufficient and insecure both personally and professionally. Secondly, their financial position is less secure than local scholars who might be more financially settled or more able to access resources that are not available to displaced scholars. Their position is also less secure than it was prior to being displaced as many academics leave Syria without savings and incur considerable expenses during their journey. People complain that academia now relies on having a higher earning partner, being young and without dependents, or even having some family money. Thirdly, taking temporary positions obliges displaced Syrian academics to spend valuable time searching for new opportunities, which can

impact their productivity. While this affects many academics who are not necessarily displaced, displaced Syrian academics (and particularly those who are older) need more time to compensate for the years of disruption to their career, as do other academics displaced due to conflicts of a protracted nature. Bazikh, who lives in France, says: "I had to start from scratch as if I had been in my twenties. I now feel uncertain about my future. I don't think I will have a pension like others [local academics] here, so I feel I will not be secure later...".

Funding for displaced academics, including Syrians, is often focused on particular jobs or projects that revolve around humanitarian or displacement-related issues. The rationale seems to be that all displaced people will want to research the politics or implications of their displacement. Some displaced Syrian academics reported the lack of funding for other fields of study, such as physics and chemistry.

NGOs such as the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) and the Institute of International Education (IIE) are providing different opportunities and funded research fellowships for displaced academics in different parts of the world. Even so, it is important to note that most of these opportunities are temporary.

Displaced academics also need support to successfully navigate unfamiliar higher education systems. Many displaced Syrian academics have gaps in their CVs because of the lack of funding, training or support to advance their academic profile, both in Syria and once they are displaced. Bazikh reported that "we, as displaced academics, may not be prepared well to compete with local academics". Career guidance for academics is often shared informally or during PhD programmes and is not easily accessible to displaced academics, hampering opportunities for promotion and success. Previously funded by an NGO in the UK, Hassan stated: "I did not have the right knowledge about how to produce publications with other researchers at university. I always feel like a guest waiting to be invited."

Conclusion

Multifaceted support is needed in many areas to facilitate the integration of displaced scholars into academia. Displaced academics should be welcomed not only to bring their lived experiences to research but also to join other intellectual communities as academics who bring a wealth of alternative types of knowledge and expertise that are not necessarily Eurocentric or Western in nature or related to displacement and humanitarianism.

Academic institutions, NGOs that help displaced scholars and even individual academics can act as an enabling force to offer support to displaced academics and help them thrive. Successful support or

mentoring schemes could be created and expanded such as those developed by the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law or by CARA. These actors can offer sustainable mentoring programmes for displaced academics, who may themselves act as future mentors for subsequent cohorts of academics. Such programmes can provide considerable support to displaced academics professionally and personally and equip them with the necessary skills to progress.

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