



ROUNDTABLE: ACADEMIC FREEDOM: CONFLICT, POLITICAL INSTABILITY, AND STATE REPRESSION

Academic Freedom and the Right to Think in Post-Civil War Syria

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Abstract

With the collapse of the regime in Syria in late 2024 and the end of a brutal civil war, Syrian higher education faces a series of challenges as it adjusts to a post-authoritarian, but Islamist, government. Institutions of higher education were significantly degraded during the war and universities became sites of resistance, surveillance, torture, and violence. This article assesses the Middle East Studies Association's failure to adequately engage with Syrian higher education during this period and argues for a renewed effort to build connections and engage in professional dialog with counterparts in the country. At the same time, it highlights renewed threats to academic freedom and new problems including heightened sectarianization, creeping gender apartheid, and unclear legal guidance for higher education. It concludes with specific proposals including the development of Arabic-language resources on academic freedom and the expression of solidarity with the Syrian people as they rebuild their country.

Keywords: academic freedom; authoritarianism; civil war; human rights; Syria

In the last 25 years, the Middle East Studies Association Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF-MENA) has written a total of four letters on behalf of scholars in Syria, but only one during the period of the Syrian Civil War (2012–25). From my perspective, that was neither sufficient nor representative of the significant need to respond to academic freedom violations and attacks on the right to education in Syria during that period.

A report sponsored by the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA) noted in 2019, “Universities in Syria are suffering politicization, militarization, and human rights violations including disappearance and murder.”¹ Physicians for

¹ Jo Dillabough, Olena Fimyar, Colleen McLaughlin, Zeina al-Azmeh, and Mona Jebri, *Syrian Higher Education Post 2011: Immediate and Future Challenges* (London: CARA, 2019), <https://www.cara.ngo/downloads/part-2-post-2011-english.pdf>.



Human Rights, a Boston-based human rights organization, documented attacks on health care and hospitals throughout Syria as well as attacks on medical professionals and healthcare workers at Syria's universities.² At University of California, Davis Human Rights Studies, we did similar research on attacks on students' higher education access and the torture of students. Much of the work I have done over the last thirteen years has focused on protecting the right of refugee Syrian young people to education, and also on understanding how higher education works as a form of civilian protection.³

This moment represents a critical reset opportunity for the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and American higher education because global civil society has a critical role to play in helping our Syrian colleagues and Syria rebuild after a war that killed at least half a million and displaced thirteen million more. At the outset I see MESA playing three roles: First, sharing our own experiences with academic freedom violations and academic freedom concepts with colleagues to build a better understanding of universal human rights to education, intellectual freedom, and freedom to think and innovate; second, identifying partners for academic freedom, human rights education, and rights assessment collaboration; and third, signaling as professionals how important the humanities are to helping people learn critical thinking skills and engage in the practice of citizenship as Syria redevelops its higher education system.

Higher Education and Syria's Authoritarian Bargain

In this article, I will first address Assad-era Syrian higher education, which was academically unfree in both conception and implementation, then move to wartime challenges to academic freedom and discuss the right to education in Syria. Finally, based on conversations with Syrian colleagues and students I will begin to highlight some of the issues facing higher education in post-Assad Syria. My background includes twenty-three years of research and public scholarship on academic freedom, the right to education, and refugees in Syria, much of which has been in collaboration with the Institute of International Education and the Scholar Rescue Fund. These thoughts also are drawn from my experience with academic freedom and right to education issues in Iraq after the American

² Physicians for Human Rights, "Destruction, Obstruction, and Inaction: The Makings of a Health Crisis in Northern Syria," December 2021, <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PHR-Syrian-Health-Disparities-Report-Dec-2021-English.pdf>.

³ Keith David Watenpaugh, Adrienne L. Fricke, and Tara Siegel, "Uncounted and Unacknowledged: Syria's Refugee University Students and Academics in Jordan," Institute of International Education, May 2013, https://www.scholarrescuefund.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf-articles/uncounted_and_unacknowledged_-_syria-s_refugee_university_students_and_academics_in_jordan_may_2013.pdf; Keith David Watenpaugh, Adrienne L. Fricke, and James R. King, "The War Follows Them: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Lebanon," Institute of International Education, June 2014, <https://www.iie.org/publications/the-war-follows-them-syrian-university-students-and-scholars-in-lebanon>; Keith David Watenpaugh, Adrienne L. Fricke, and James R. King, "We Will Stop Here and Go No Further: Syrian University Students and Scholars in Turkey," Institute of International Education, October 2014, <https://www.iie.org/publications/we-will-stop-here-and-go-no-further-syrian-university-students-and-scholars-in-turkey>.

invasion in 2003. And finally, many of my comments derive from interviews with several Syrian scholars—both in and outside of Syria—including two Scholar Rescue Fund fellows, Oula Abu-Amsha, who worked at a research institute in Damascus, and Amal Alachkar, who taught in the pharmacology department at the University of Aleppo and now is my colleague in the University of California system.⁴ I have added a postscript following my early 2026 visit to Damascus.

Higher education was a key element of Syria's authoritarian bargain. It was also quite extensive. There are universities in all provincial capitals and a collection of research institutes primarily dedicated to engineering, computing, and the sciences, and sometimes associated with the Syrian military. In addition, the 1990s saw the creation of a wide range of what might be called practical community colleges, where young people earned the equivalent of an associate degree in fields including hospitality, baking, childcare, and arts and crafts. The universities were comprehensive, awarding a full range of degrees across many different fields.

What do I mean by “authoritarian bargain?” Syria under the Assads was an authoritarian state, a quintessential “republic of fear.” The quiescence of the population was incentivized or compelled by the government. One of those incentives, especially for middle-class families in large urban centers, was the ability to demonstrate that they had attained middle-class status by being able to send their young people to university. Universities were not seen as places where young people were trained to engage in critical inquiry, but rather where they were socially credentialed, disciplined, and trained as medical professionals, bureaucrats, and office workers or for work in commerce. If one failed to comply or spoke out, one of the punishments available to the Syrian government was preventing one's children from attending higher education.

Faculty of Syria's higher education institutions often were generated through the system itself; older faculty had studied in Europe, North America, or the Soviet Union. Syrian higher education faculty always had a very international character before the war; most faculty had spent some time abroad, either in the West or at other Arab universities. In an interesting intersection with some of our work on CAF-MENA, at the beginning of this century many of the faculty at Syria's private institutions (Syria embarked on a modest experiment with private institutions most of which were for profit, and not based on a nonprofit model) were Iraqis who had fled during the era after the American invasion and during the “war on intellectuals” from 2006 to 2010, during which over four hundred Iraqi academics and medical professionals were targeted for kidnapping and murder.⁵

About 17 percent of Syria's urban youth from Damascus, Hama, Homs, and Aleppo attended various forms of higher education; again this was seen by Syrians as a marker of class status. Rural young people attended at a much lower

⁴ Oula Abu-Amsha, interview with author, October 2025; Amal Alachkar, interview with author, October 2025.

⁵ Max Fuller and Dirk Adriaenssens, “Wiping the Slate Clean,” in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*, ed. Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael, and Tareq Y. Ismael, 149–202 (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

rate. During the period before the Arab Spring, Syrian universities were not really known as centers of organized opposition or democratic advocacy because the same kinds of bargain and bargaining that took place on behalf of students and their families also took place on behalf of faculty. Faculty positions at these universities were modestly compensated and carried with them social prestige, but if one used the position to speak out, as Arif Dalila did in the early 2000s, one could find oneself without a position, and even exiled. Even before the war Syria's higher education institutions were areas of surveillance, discipline, and control.

The Syrian Civil War and Higher Education As a Battlefield

Let me now move to higher education during the revolution. At the beginning of the 2010s, there was a series of demonstrations at Syrian universities, beginning in Damascus. Young people and students were part of those demonstrations, rejecting some of the forms of social compliance and complicity that their parents had adopted. An evocative account of the demonstrations at Aleppo University are captured in the Waad al-Kateab 2019 film, *For Sama*.⁶ She participated in several organized demonstrations, and we know that almost immediately *shabbīha*, or government toughs, began to attack and kill demonstrators.⁷ There were bombings at both Damascus University and Aleppo University in 2013. The attack on Aleppo University was the reason for the only CAF-MENA letter during the civil war period.

In addition to students facing persecution because of their activism, throughout this period faculty, driven by compassion and following the leadership of their students, found themselves advocating on behalf of their own students' human rights, even if they may not have supported their revolutionary ideology. Many of the faculty members that I spoke with said their activism was remarkable because they never thought they would ever oppose the government, but when they saw what was happening to their own students, whom they genuinely cared about, they could not just stand by. Syrian faculty who chose this path faced official persecution for their advocacy, and those who survived began to flee.

What also emerged early in this period was the outsized role of the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS), modeled on student organizations throughout the world, in which young people practice politics and host events and speakers. Instead, it became an arm of the Syrian secret police within Syrian universities. The Strasbourg-based Syrians for Truth and Justice, which has been engaged in human rights documentation since 2016, demonstrated that NUSS offices on university campuses were used as unofficial detention and interrogation sites.⁸

⁶ Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts, dirs., *For Sama*, Channel 4 News/Frontline, 2019.

⁷ See the remarkable account of this period by Ali Aljaseem, "An Episode of the Revolution: Aleppo University Protest Movement 2011–2013," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 3 (2022): 446–62.

⁸ Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Syria: The National Union of Syrian Students As a Tool of Repression in Syrian Universities," June 2025, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-the-national-union-of-syrian-students-as-a-tool-of-repression-in-syrian-universities>.

The systematic involvement of NUSS in human rights violations meant that it was an auxiliary branch of the state security apparatus and not really an independent student body organization. Any student showing leadership, or who was not considered loyal, was brought in for interrogation and torture. That is when I learned of the expression “light torture,” meaning “routine” beatings as opposed to heavy torture, which included whippings, rape, and the use of electricity. NUSS has since been disbanded and formally accused of crimes against humanity.⁹

During the war about a thousand Syrian academics fled to surrounding countries, most going to Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Approximately a quarter million refugee university students also went into exile. Again, many went to Turkey and Jordan, but still more to Europe, especially during the great movement of humanity in 2016–17. The war hollowed out Syrian higher education with the loss of many of these faculty, especially faculty who had Western connections. By 2017 almost everyone who could leave had left. After 2017, according to my informants, the quality of instruction plummeted, and enrollment grew primarily in areas under government control, as increasing numbers of Syrians were displaced. Universities continued to be sites of torture, surveillance, and brutality. Of the faculty who did remain some became targets while others became informants for the state.

Toward Post-Assad Syrian Higher Education

In late 2024, the regime fell to Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham. Among the first things that happened on campuses was the disbanding of NUSS, and then a purge of those faculty members who were seen as informants for the regime. Student demonstrations on the various campuses, especially in Damascus, demanded removal of faculty who were seen as pro-regime, and many of those faculty, according to people I have spoken to, have just “faded away.”¹⁰

In October 2025, I explicitly put this question to Abu-Amsha and Alachkar: Did they think the new government, with its strong Islamist leanings, would impose its own form of control and discipline? Neither voiced major concerns at that moment—nor did they express a desire to return to Syria as faculty. This is a reality for many exiled Syrian academics. They have been out of the country for so long that they have established new lives and ties to the places they are located. Alachkar has a tenured faculty position and leadership role at UC Irvine. Yet even having been outside Syria for over a decade, both colleagues are attuned to academic freedom issues, and I take them seriously when they express some optimism that there will be growth in forms of faculty

⁹ Dar Justice, “Militia on Campus: Crimes of the National Union of Syrian Students at Damascus University,” Syrian British Consortium, 2024, <https://syrianbritish.org/nuiss-report>.

¹⁰ “Damascus University Professor Arrested for Helping Assad ‘Disappear’ Pro-Democracy Students,” The New Arab, 5 February 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/damascus-university-professor-suspended-over-assad-regime-ties>.

self-governance and respect for human rights and academic freedom on campuses. Alachkar, for example, was able to hold a conference at Damascus University in fall 2025, which allowed her to foster a dialogue between exiled scholars and others in the country, with the purpose of trying to, in her words, “make the university serve society and not the regime.” At these conferences there have been open discussions about academic freedom and some discussion of the need for teaching critical thinking as the basis for citizenship. Abu-Amsha was not concerned about the continuing role of Alawites—members of a non-Sunni Muslim religious minority, who, along with Baath Party members could have received preferential treatment by the state in the past—in positions of authority, although she and others have some concerns about the sectarianization of Syrian higher education. She also advocates for significant reform of teacher training to best achieve broader social reform. But by and large neither noted any obvious restrictions, so far, on women’s or non-Muslims’ participation in Syrian educational systems.

I will conclude with another area of concern. A great deal of Syrian academic and intellectual activity occurs outside of universities, and this is where many of Syria’s non-Muslim community members do their work, because they historically have been prevented from becoming faculty members at Syrian universities. There also is the question of how to integrate areas under Kurdish control where a rich Kurdish language curriculum has developed, and whether there will be an impulse to Arabize it and to deny Kurds the right to study in Kurdish.

Given MESA’s stated commitment to academic freedom in the region, I recommend these next steps. First, there does seem to be the formation of faculty unions in Syria, and this would be a good place to try to connect and host an American Association of University Professors/MESA academic freedom seminar. Another area for development is the production of resources in Arabic on academic freedom standards and the human right to education as outlined in international human rights treaties and national frameworks. One could imagine a series of infographics or webinars in Arabic on the subject. Resources on academic freedom in regional languages are not widely available, and without these resources only academics with strong English or French language skills and preexisting institutional and academic connections can easily access support from organizations like MESA or PEN International.

As an organization, we have neglected academic freedom issues in Syria. The problem of human rights and human need in Syria is complex and opaque in a way that is difficult to understand even for those of us who claim to specialize in its history and politics. Yet, the enthusiasm and optimism I have heard in my conversations with people familiar with the situation is palpable and deeply heartwarming. It tells me that there is a new opportunity for us, not just an opportunity for us to provide practical assistance, but also to more generally express our solidarity with peoples in the Middle East in a consistent and equitable way.



College of Science student cafeteria, Aleppo University, Aleppo, Syria (May 2026) (Photo: K. Watenpugh)

Postscript: Damascus, January 2026

In the days immediately before submitting this intervention (January 2026), I traveled to Damascus to take part in a conference on the status of archives and archival work at the University of Damascus. The meeting also included the new director of the National Library. I highlight three areas of concern and ongoing questions in the wake of my brief visit. Although many with whom I spoke hoped a new higher education law (like a new Syrian constitution) would be in effect by early 2026, this has not come to pass, and Assad-era legislation, which provides no protections for academic freedom, is still in effect. The status of women on university campuses remains unchanged. When I visited campus the overwhelming number of students was female, with very few young men in attendance. This is the result of many university and draft-age men having fled the country. More worrisome was evidence of creeping gender apartheid in Syria, a high-profile example being the separate and unequal access to precincts at the Grand Umayyad Mosque. The outsized role of Sunni Muslim religious officials in legal proceedings is of equal concern and may eventually have curricular implications at all levels of Syrian education. Finally, at the time of writing and following a brutal and brief war between the Syrian Army and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Party, the state issued a major decree recognizing Kurdish cultural rights that may have implications on higher education in northeastern Syria.

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