

Challenges and Difficulties of University Study in Northwestern Syria

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The ongoing conflict in Syria has entered its thirteenth year. Nearly half of the Syrian population has fled their homes to escape the fighting, within Syria or externally to neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey. The population in 2023 reached about 26.7 million, of which 17 million people are inside the country and 9 million outside. The conflict causes massive destruction and great losses in many areas and sectors. Access to shelter, livelihood opportunities, health, education, water, and sanitation has also severely deteriorated since the beginning of the conflict.

The higher education sector is one of the sectors that have been greatly damaged by the war. It has faced many challenges since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, as many schools, educational centers, and infrastructures were destroyed as a result of displacement, instability, and destruction of educational institutions, and migration of staff. All of this led to the low quality of education. The number of public and private universities in Syria located in the areas controlled by the Syrian regime had reached nearly 30 by 2021, including, for example, Damascus University, University of Aleppo, Al-Baath University, Tishreen University, University of Kalamoon, and Al-Wataniya Private University. In the opposition-dominated northwestern regions of Syria, which arose in 2015, there are about 15 public and private universities, including, among others, Idlib University, Free Aleppo University, Sham University, Al-Shamal Private University, and several branches of Gaziantep University (Turkey). There are approximately 35 thousand students in these universities in total.

Abstract

The higher education sector in Syria has been greatly affected by the ongoing war. Many problems and challenges facing higher education have emerged. Students in the northwestern regions of Syria in particular face many difficulties, such as nonrecognition of their certificates, the difficulty of securing job opportunities, high costs of study, and irregularities due to their need to work to cover the expenses of their studies.

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Syria has become divided into several areas of influence and the map of control has remained constant since 2020. First of all, there are areas controlled by the Assad regime; they constitute about 63 percent of the country, and have a population of about 9.6 million people. Then, there are areas under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces; they cover 26 percent of the territory of eastern and northeastern Syria, where about 2.6 million people live. Finally, there are areas controlled by the opposition factions; they make up 11 percent of the country's territory with a population of about 4.3 million, distributed between the interim government in the countryside of northern Aleppo, and the control of the Syrian Salvation Government in and around Idlib.

Difficulties and Challenges of University Study

With the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, a large number of students dropped out of universities, and many cities found themselves facing a gap in the educational sector. In 2015, academics opened a number of universities in northwestern Syria in order to continue education and bridge the gap in the sector. It was clear that action was needed in the education sector due to high drop-out rates related to security concerns and financial reasons, and problems with mobility after the start of the conflict. In view of the presence of thousands of postsecondary students in the region, and the urgent need to save the Syrian youth from ignorance and loss, these universities took it upon themselves to accommodate these young people's needs and provide training and education. Students face many challenges, including the often long distances between home and classroom, the lack of reliable means of transportation, and the consequent large financial burdens that they may not be able to bear, as well as physical fatigue. Students studying in the universities of the northern countryside of Aleppo need to travel frequently for up to 150 kilometers. The students' inability to pay high rent in the areas close to the university forces them to use public transport, which is not always available, or to discontinue their studies.

Among other challenges and difficulties are also high tuition costs and other study-related expenses. In northern Syria, annual fees range between USD 150 and USD 500 at semi-private universities, while some private universities charge up to USD 1800 per year. All universities depend on students as their main and only source of funding.

International Recognition of Degrees

It should be said that the degrees awarded by Syrian universities are currently not recognized internationally, even though these universities strive to provide all standards of quality and academic accreditation by developing new and improving existing teaching plans, attracting relevant specialists, and publishing scientific research, especially in international peer-reviewed journals. Universities also like to obtain membership in various educational networks and to be ranked by different ranking bodies. Syrian universities also strive for memoranda of understanding with Turkish and European universities in order to improve the situation for their graduates and their ranking. Universities in northern Syria see such activities as a pillar for increasing collaboration and for gaining recognition, but universities from other countries are reluctant to partner with Syrian universities because of the ongoing uncertainty and lack of security in Syria.

For thousands of Syrian students, the future is a frightening nightmare due to the many problems of the higher education sector, including this lack of international recognition of their university degrees, as well as the problem of fragmentation of higher education in Syria among many supervisory bodies. ▲

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