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Syrian universities in the uprising

By Radwan Ziadeh

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In February 2011, when 15 school children were arrested in Daraa, a small city close to the Jordanian border, everything changed in Syria. The young boys, seized by local authorities for aping revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt and spray painting “the people demand the fall of the regime” on the walls of a local school, were beaten and tortured. Thousands of protesters gathered at the al-Omari Mosque and marched at security forces, demanding the release of the children, greater political freedom, and an end to government corruption. When riot police failed to stop the protesters' advance with batons and water cannons, members of the security services opened fire on the unarmed crowd with live ammunition, killing four and wounding a dozen.

The Ba`ath party headquarters in Daraa was burned to the ground and demonstrations grew daily amid ever harsher security crackdowns. Huge counter-protests, planned by and in support of the regime, occurred in Damascus, with demonstrators shouting, “God, Syria, and Bashar, that's all.” The tension across the country was palpable.

This was the beginning of the daily peaceful demonstrations in Syria, but the university at that time did not play the important role they had played in other revolutions in Iran, Tunisia and Egypt.

Why was this so? When we understand that Syrian authoritarianism under the Assad family considered universities as branches of the ruling Ba`ath party, this explains why the auditorium of the university itself became the place where Al-Assad addressed the Syrian people.

Although historically the Syrian university had been the source of mass protests against French occupation, military rule, and the Baghdad alliance in the 1950s, following the onset of Ba'ath party rule, the Syrian university system was quickly transformed into an extension of the hand of the security state. Although the Ba'ath party made higher education freely available to hundreds of thousands of Syrian university students, universities were also used as a means of spying on the Syrian youth. Students were (and still are) encouraged to join the Ba'ath party and the National Union of Syrian Students (NUSS, which is run by Ba'ath party). Doing so could raise a student's final grades and afford the student easier access to university housing.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Syrian universities were slow to wake during the early days of the Syrian revolution in 2011. The vast patronage system and network of informants across Syria's university system was enough to effectively stifle any burgeoning youth protest movements against the regime. When demonstrations did occur, they were quickly met with counter-protests organized by the pro-regime NUSS. Students were encouraged to report anti-regime activities to supervisors and report on students filming anti-regime demonstrations. Hundreds of plain-clothes police officers were deployed to patrol campuses as well. The result? For months, no large youth protest movements in support of the Syrian revolution appeared on Syrian university campuses.

Then in 2012, as violence in the conflict increased, the wall of fear that had held back Syrian students was finally broken. Students in universities across the country began to gather in support of the Syrian revolution. Student protests, like the demonstrations held in the streets, were not organized without consequence, however. In May 2012, seven students were killed when Syrian government security forces attacked a demonstration and arrested hundreds at Aleppo University. Syrian human rights monitoring organizations estimate that more than 35,000 Syrian students have been arrested on campus since the start of the revolution.[i] Only half of those have been released from prison. Universities across the country are now on lockdown. Every student is searched and interrogated when entering campus. Syrian secret police regularly patrol, arrest and harass students. Members of the NUSS have received training and even weapons directly from their supervisors in the Syrian security forces. NUSS students provide names of students to their regime supervisors and assist in conducting the mass arrests that now occur every semester during exams.

But students in support of the Syrian revolution have not sat idly by. The Union of Free Syrian Students (UFSS) was formed early in the revolution to serve as an anti-regime counterweight to the pro-Ba'athist NUSS. The UFSS continues to this day to report and document on-campus arrests of students and the deaths of university students due to regime-sponsored violence. Additionally, the UFSS organizes flash anti-regime demonstrations and conducts boycotts. UFSS also tries to support students that have been expelled from university and forced to flee the country due to their anti-regime activities, for example, in working to establish a scholarship fund for students seeking to complete their studies outside of Syria.

Two years after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, it is clear that the struggle for democracy and freedom has devolved into an armed conflict with no end in sight. Just as a stalemate seems to prevail in Syrian streets, so too is there a stalemate on university campuses across the country. Most Syrian universities now look more like prisons than centers of learning. With networks of spies and secret police waiting to arrest any who would dare question the authority of the Syrian government on campus, prospects for young Syrian revolutionaries seem dim. And yet, with the Union of Free Syrian Students and other similar groups, it is clear that there remain those who are willing to go to great lengths to contribute to Syria's struggle for liberation.

[Editors note: Scholars at Risk and our partners receive regular requests for emergency assistance for Syrian scholars and students. Scholars at Risk urges higher education institutions willing to host study or work visits by Syrian students and scholars to contact the network office at scholarsatrisk@nyu.edu. Donations to aide Syrian higher education can be made to Scholars at Risk's Emergency Fund at: <https://donatenow.networkforgood.org/1436194>.]

[i] Syrian Network for Human Rights, <http://www.syrianhr.org/>

Italy: the importance of university training in the prevention and fight against corruption and organized crime

By Emilia Lacroce

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“The mafia dreads schools more than justice” said Antonino Caponnetto, the Italian anti-mafia magistrate. A specialized training is essential in the fight against corruption and organized crime, in Italy and all over the world. In 2010, for this reason, the [Master’s programme on “Analysis, prevention and the fight against organized crime and corruption”](#) was born, organized by the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Pisa in partnership with [Libera](#) (the leading Italian anti-mafia association) and [Avviso Pubblico](#) (a network of local administrations promoting a culture of legality).

The 4th edition of the first and second level Master’s programme will start in January 2014. It is one of the first academic experiences in Italy to combine in-depth analysis and professional training on combating organized crime and political and administrative corruption. The programme’s innovative and interdisciplinary approach to promoting a culture of legality sets it apart from other programmes. Students from Switzerland, Peru, Argentina and Italy have graduated from the programme, illustrating that concern about the spread of criminal organizations is shared across the five continents. Organized crime and corruption are permanent threats to citizens, businesses, state institutions and the global economy; and drains on resources that are needed for societal development, especially during periods of recession.

One high profile Italian scholar and public intellectual who was at risk because of his work on these issues recently said: “the real challenge lies in passing along this information to the public, making it become a subject that people talk about, discuss, repeat and want to understand better”. The University of Pisa’s Master’s programme aims to promote greater discussion and understanding of the issue of organized crime and to apply greater expertise to combat such crime and corruption. In so doing, it hopes that in time this greater exposure will reduce the isolation of academics currently working on this issue and reduce the risks faced by intellectuals who work to expose corruption. Prevention and solutions to corruption and organized crime start from such kinds of university training.

As a spin-off of this academic path and with the professional partnership of Master’s professors and alumni, arises [“Riparte il Futuro”](#), a citizens’ campaign against corruption organised by [Libera](#) and [Gruppo Abele](#). Under this campaign, 300,000 people sign and endorse a petition, asking politicians for their serious engagement in the fight against corruption, because there can be no fresh start without confronting the issues of organized crime and corruption. From these experiences, the [“Carta di Pisa”](#) was also established: an anti-corruption and bribery code of conduct for public administrators.

Students, academics, associations and universities have a responsibility to work together to shine a light on widespread corruption and organized crime infiltrations and to apply their research and findings to improving current policies addressing these issues around the globe. The Master’s programme, [“Riparte il Futuro”](#), and [“Carta di Pisa”](#) are just a few examples of how they might meet this responsibility.

The doctrinal place of the right to academic freedom under the UN covenants on human rights—A rejoinder to Antoon de Baets

By Klaus D. Beiter

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The author wishes to respond to Antoon de Baets’s claims (“[The doctrinal place of the right to academic freedom under the UN covenants on human rights—A rejoinder](#)”^[i]), *firstly*, that the various provisions in the Human Rights Covenants relevant to academic freedom can be grouped into those that are preconditions for and those that directly contribute to academic freedom and, *secondly*, that “Article 13 [of the ICESCR] [on the right to education] alone is too weak a basis to support academic freedom because the latter has many aspects which are not education-related”.

First, while De Baets's distinction between provisions that *directly contribute* to academic freedom and provisions that constitute *preconditions* for academic freedom has facial appeal, it breaks down upon further inspection (De Baets includes in the former group ICCPR and ICESCR provisions, respectively, on freedoms of religion, expression, assembly and association, the prohibition of hate speech, and the rights to education and freedom of scientific research; in the latter group, he includes provisions prohibiting cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, on liberty and security of the person, on freedom of movement or providing protection against unlawful attacks on one's honour and reputation). Rather, the rights De Baets considers to be preconditions for academic freedom are intrinsic to the concept as such. The right of academic travel, for example, which flows from the freedom of movement, should not be seen as a precondition for academic freedom; it is an element thereof. Scholars' access, nationally and internationally, to repositories of knowledge and meetings with colleagues in other parts of the country or the world *are* exercising academic freedom as such. Moreover, attacks on the liberty and security of university staff and students or their physical integrity, honour and reputation are so widespread that it would be a mockery not to describe these as assaults on academic freedom itself, specifically as the human rights violations concerned occur precisely because of academic content supported by scholars.

As to De Baets's second objection, the author wishes to reassert his earlier view to the effect that Article 13 does constitute a "complete locus for the right to academic freedom ... within the UN Covenants". De Baets maintains that "academic freedom is the result of a complex interplay of human rights" and that "[a] multilayered roof for academic freedom is irreconcilable with a single roof". One of the most fundamental precepts of human rights law is the idea that all human rights are interdependent and indivisible. This means that one human rights entitlement may simultaneously be protected under different human rights provisions. This does not mean, however, that the entitlement concerned may not quintessentially "be rooted" in a particular provision, whose specific context inspires the overall interpretation of that norm. It is in this sense that the various provisions referred to above should all be relied upon to protect relevant elements of academic freedom. Article 13 ICESCR, however, constitutes the provision which concurrently assembles all aspects of academic freedom under "a single roof" and whose normative context provides the proper framework for interpretation.

Academic freedom does not - as De Baets claims - have "many aspects which are not education-related". One should not confuse "academic freedom" with "freedom of research". The latter includes academic freedom, but its scope and beneficiaries are wider. "Freedom of research" is protected in Article 15(3) ICESCR, which enjoins states parties "to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research". Such freedom might protect scientists conducting research for private corporations, whose work may be viewed as valuable in an overall cultural context (and thus entitled to protection under the ICESCR), but such protection cannot be the same as that afforded to staff and students in education. Academic freedom is conferred with regard to *teaching and/or research in educational institutions and research establishments "close" to the educational milieu, including those privately run institutions and establishments serving first and foremost the public interest in education.*

In support of his claim that academic freedom "has many aspects which are not education-related", De Baets cites a definition of "academic freedom" not specifically referring to education drawn from the UNESCO *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel* of 1997. The Recommendation, by definition (see para. 1), applies to academic staff in higher education, and thus to the higher educational setting generally - but only this setting. [ii] Under this definition, then, teaching, research and self-governance, as aspects of academic freedom, are always education-related, even if they do not relate to teaching directly. In this sense, Article 13 ICESCR with its wide concept of "education" stands as a complete doctrinal setting for academic freedom.

[i] See Antoon De Baets, "The doctrinal place of the right to academic freedom under the UN covenants on human rights—A rejoinder", University Values Bulletin, May 2012, available at:

http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/documents/UV_MAY_2012.pdf See also Klaus Dieter Beiter, "The doctrinal place of the right to academic freedom under the UN covenants on human rights," in University Values Bulletin, July 2011, available at: http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/documents/UV_JULY_2011.pdf

[ii] By contrast, UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Status of Scientific Researchers* (1974) applies to "those persons responsible for investigating a specific domain in science or technology", irrespective of the setting in which they work. This Recommendation mentions "academic freedom" only once in 6000 words.

Academic Freedom Aotearoa: the launch of a New Zealand watchdog

By Stephen Day

Communications and Campaigns Officer, Tertiary Education Union, New Zealand

“Academic freedom is crucial to a strong democracy,” says Professor Jack Heinemann, co-chair of a new group of New Zealand academics out to defend academic freedom.

The group, Academic Freedom Aotearoa, is a watchdog and advocacy group made up of academics from all around New Zealand. (Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand.) The group is committed to protecting and enhancing academic freedom and tertiary education institutions’ autonomous role as the critic and conscience of society. In a few weeks, the group has grown from a core group of eight academics to include over 200 members and supporters now.

New Zealand academics do not face the extreme threats of imprisonment, torture or murder that many academics in other countries face. Furthermore, they have another special set of circumstances that distinguishes them from many of their international colleagues; their right to academic freedom is codified in law, with New Zealand’s Education Act declaring that academic freedom, including the right of academics to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions, is to be preserved and enhanced.

“Academic freedom is a responsibility placed on scholars to present uncomfortable truths that might otherwise cost them their jobs, liberty and life at some times and in some places. Parliament gives this responsibility and right to staff and students at New Zealand universities. It is what makes New Zealand a dynamic place to live, learn, and innovate,” said Professor Heinemann.

However, New Zealand academics are not without challenges to their academic freedom. The threats are pernicious rather than life threatening. The government has shouted down several academics whose work has challenged government policies that do not stand up to academic scrutiny.

When government ministers and officials bully or denigrate academics who speak out as politically motivated or biased, without engaging with their research-based arguments they not only undermine high quality public debate, they also harm academic freedom. Such attacks create an environment that discourages academics from engaging with public debate and dismisses the expertise of all academics carrying out rigorous research.

“The government’s plans to make commercial research the key funding priority for universities also undermines academic freedom,” says Dr. Sandra Grey, the other co-chair of Academic Freedom Aotearoa.

“Commercialisable research is valuable to New Zealand, and we support it,” says Dr. Grey. “But we also need to support a balanced portfolio of activities that are good for New Zealand, including research that questions and challenges business or government.”

Like many areas of the economy, work in the tertiary education sector is becoming increasingly precarious. When large numbers of new and emerging academics have short-term contracts, and little job security, it is hard for them to test and question received wisdom because any offence they cause may mean their job will not be renewed. New Zealand must engage in a debate about what precarious employment means for academic freedom.

In particular, Dr. Grey says that Academic Freedom Aotearoa needs to look after New Zealand’s new colleagues.

“While many established New Zealand academics, having learnt their craft in a culture of academic freedom, continue to speak out, many young and aspiring academics are now much more reticent to do

so. They know that their job relies on their ability to bring in external research funding and to protect the good reputation of their university. Many do not have job security because their employment agreements roll from funding contract to funding contract or course to course. They know it is safer to keep their head low. This is certainly not in the interest of our profession or in the public interest.”

A call for research and knowledge sharing on the role of higher education in post-conflict recovery

By Sansom Milton

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Higher education is often neglected in terms of post-conflict investment yet the sector offers arguably a major resource that can contribute to post-conflict reconstruction, statebuilding, peacebuilding, and related fields - what will be referred to here as post-conflict recovery. In post-conflict contexts higher education sectors can connect to a wide range of post-conflict recovery tasks including re-pooling human capital depleted by war and displacement, research on local social and developmental challenges, and a long-term sustainable approach to capacity building. However, while basic education in emergencies, conflict and reconstruction has recently emerged as a major research area the issue of higher education in post-conflict recovery remains largely under-studied in academic literature. Existing studies tend to be conducted at the country or project level with few previous attempts at global theorisation of the field. [i]

While the issue remains under-studied and under-theorised, over the past decade there has been increasingly greater global recognition at the level of practice of the importance of higher education in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts, as evidenced by the expansion of various scholar rescue schemes. Furthermore, over the past decade there has been a growth in projects and programmes designed to build domestic higher education and research capacity in post-conflict countries, for instance university partnership and scholarship programmes. However, this increase in activity has not been followed by a corresponding increase in the number of publicly-available evaluations, reports, and assessments. As a result, the knowledge base on the effectiveness of higher education interventions and policies in post-conflict settings is very weak. There is therefore a need for greater sharing of knowledge on higher education in post-conflict contexts.

While carrying out fieldwork on higher education in post-war Libya it was found that many university and Ministry officials faced the myriad challenges of the post-conflict environment with very low knowledge of how similar problems were addressed in other settings. While Libyan officials should be commended for adapting in often innovative ways to these challenges it remains the case that lessons learned from other cases including Iraq, Afghanistan, or Lebanon could have improved policy and practice. In order that such lesson learning can occur in a way that could enable the higher education sector to be harnessed as a positive resource capable of driving future cases of reconstruction and development, it is vital that knowledge of higher education in a wide range of post-conflict contexts is shared and reflected upon in a much more systematic manner.

Beyond international agencies and universities producing and sharing information and knowledge on post-conflict higher education it is also vital to seek the voices of universities and academic communities in post-conflict settings. As others have argued, ‘Southern’ voices are often excluded from debates over fragility, peacebuilding, and recovery.[ii] An inclusive dialogue involving diverse voices and perspectives from across the globe can establish the importance of learning, knowledge, and higher education to the long-term task of recovery and development in post-conflict societies.

The Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit and the Education in Conflict and Emergencies programme at the University of York are concerned with the role of education at all levels in the recovery and development of conflict-affected countries and would welcome sharing of knowledge on relevant cases and project evaluations in addition to collaborative work on higher education and post-conflict recovery.

For more information please see the following websites:

Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit <http://www.york.ac.uk/politics/centres/prdu/>
Education in Conflict and Emergencies <http://www.york.ac.uk/iee/eice/>
For any enquiries please email sansom.milton@york.ac.uk

[i] A notable exception is the recent working paper Feuer, Hart Nadav., Hornidge, Anna-Katharina., & Schetter, Conrad. 2013. Rebuilding Knowledge: Opportunities and Risks for Higher Education in Post-Conflict Regions. Working Paper 121. ZEF. University of Bonn. Available online at: http://www.zef.de/fileadmin/media/news/fb37_wp121.pdf

[ii] See for example IDRC/CCNY. 2012. Eliciting and Applying Local Research Knowledge for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding. Occasional Paper. International Development Research Centre and Carnegie Corporation of New York.

ANNOUNCEMENT - Scholars at Risk releases the following new reports

"The University & the Nation: Safeguarding Higher Education in Tunisia & Beyond"

On November 18, 2013, Scholars at Risk and the NYU Center for Dialogues released the report of their co-organized conference, [The University and the Nation: Safeguarding Higher Education in Tunisia and Beyond](#), which was held on February 21-22, 2013 at the University of Manouba in Tunis. The conference was organized with the aim of fostering a dialogue about the role of higher education institutions in democratic societies, and to highlight the need for strong protections for core higher education values - including academic freedom, institutional autonomy and social responsibility - in the newly emerging order in Tunisia and beyond. For more information on the conference visit [here](#). The full report is available [here](#).

Institutional Autonomy and the Protection of Higher Education from Attack

Scholars at Risk is pleased to share the publication of a new report, "[Institutional Autonomy and the Protection of Higher Education from Attack](#)." The report examines the need for increased efforts to protect higher education from violent and coercive attacks by simultaneously increasing security and autonomy. The report was issued on December 4, 2013 by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack ([GCPEA](#)). Scholars at Risk is a member of the coalition's Higher Education Working Group and played a leading role in developing the report.

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