

Civil Society and the Challenges in Refugee Higher Education

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Education is a basic human right that is recognized in a number of international conventions, including the 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations (UN). It is also one of the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and seen as critical for promoting peaceful and inclusive societies. The global refugee regime has shifted its focus from humanitarian assistance toward a development approach to forced displacement. These changing priorities acknowledge that education and jobs help restore vulnerable populations' autonomy and dignity. This is all the more important since the durable solutions of return, reintegration, and resettlement are increasingly difficult to pursue. Protracted conflicts, and the chronic weakness of many states of origin, often prevent repatriation within a reasonable period (Long 2014). Yet the number of resettlement places in third countries is dwindling, and most refugee-hosting countries refuse to consider permanent local integration, because they view refugees as an economic burden and a security threat.

The concept of education in emergencies accepts that education must be an integral part of the emergency response to a refugee situation. Education provides displaced persons with the skills and knowledge to live independent and self-reliant lives, and reduces their economic vulnerabilities and risk of involvement in armed groups. Moreover, it strengthens their potential to contribute to peacebuilding and postconflict recovery of war-torn societies (UNHCR 2017). Refugee access to primary and secondary education has greatly improved over the years. But tertiary education was, until fairly recently, rarely considered in humanitarian responses. The UNHCR 2012–2016 Education Strategy (UNHCR 2012) for the

first time made refugee higher education a core component of the agency's protection and durable solutions mandate.

Refugees themselves also see educational opportunities as crucial for their own future and that of their countries (Dryden-Peterson 2011). Interest in higher education in emergencies grew with the Syrian conflict. Prior to the outbreak of the war, Syrians were ranked among the most educated populations in the Middle East (Al-Hessian 2016). But the peaceful protests inspired by the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt soon descended into brutal repression and armed fighting. When the violence interrupted their studies, many young Syrians hoped to continue their education abroad. Visa requirements and limited scholarships, however, often shatter these dreams. At the global level, only 1 percent of eligible refugees are able to enroll in university (UNESCO and UNHCR 2017).

Nonprofit organizations are stepping in to help meet these educational needs through scholarship programs in third countries. Examples of such mobility-centered approaches to displacement include the Institute of International Education (IIE), United World Colleges (UWC), the World University Service of Canada (WUSC), and the Global Platform for Syrian Students. The Habesha Project, whose staff and students I have interviewed since 2018, brings Syrian refugee students to Mexico to study Spanish and complete their higher education. Their experience shows that scholarship programs are critical in affording young refugees the chance of a dignified life. The organizations must, however, also understand and manage the expectations of scholarship recipients, and provide them with an adequate stipend and psychosocial support.

Kindling Compassion

Habesha emerged at the height of the Syrian conflict. Its founder and director, Adrián Meléndez, is a Mexican lawyer who had completed assignments in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Lebanon before conceiving his own humanitarian initiative. In 2013 his work in a Syrian refugee camp in northern Iraq gave Adrián his first direct immersion in the lives of displaced persons. These encounters, and his perception that Mexico was only marginally involved in the global response to the Syria crisis, were decisive for the creation of Habesha. Looking back on this time, Adrián remembers: “I felt I had accumulated a lot of experience since Afghanistan. Being in a war zone, with all the adrenaline, was like in a movie. In Lebanon I developed this fascination with the Arab Spring, wanted to write. Later, in the refugee camp, I soaked up all this information about Syria and the refugees. By then I had knowledge, I had ego, money, and drive. I felt I had to do something. Habesha became my obsession. It just had to happen.”

Throughout 2014 and much of 2015, Adrián used his contacts and funds to consult with scholars, diplomats, and activists on how to turn a wild idea into reality. The initial uncertainties and missteps beset subsequent efforts to turn Habesha into a sustainable project. Adrián recalls: “In Iraq and during my travels Habesha made a lot of sense. It seemed easy enough to do. Everyone congratulated me for what I was doing. I felt empowered, felt anything was possible. I thought that in a few months we’d be able to bring 30 Syrian students to Mexico. I didn’t imagine that we’d take so long to make it happen.” After a year and a half of nonstop meetings, Adrián and his collaborators were ready to present Habesha to the media and to raise money to bring over the first students.

Habesha, its name a reference to the Abyssinian Kingdom that welcomed strangers regardless of their origins, conveys the organization’s support for open borders. Its objectives are threefold: to provide Syrian refugee students with university scholarships and stipends; to foster intercultural dialogue; and to promote a philanthropic culture in Mexico. Habesha secures tuition waivers, facilitates visas and makes travel arrangements,

pays a modest maintenance grant, and helps with housing, health care, study materials, and leisure activities. The Syrian students, through informal and classroom exchanges, add to the intercultural and civic education of others. Refugees are valued for their positive contributions to society and can help dismantle prejudices toward them (Ferede 2018).

Habesha’s social media activity and public speaking engagements serve the dual purpose of sensitizing people to Muslim refugees and soliciting donations. Raising adequate contributions has proved challenging in a country with no tradition of charitable giving. Initially, crowdfunding campaigns and media headlines about the Syrian conflict helped raise travel funds. Habesha relied on student volunteers for much of its work and only in 2017 was able to rent an office and recruit a small team of staff. They are recent graduates who are prepared to work long, stressful hours in return for a small—sometimes unpaid—salary and professional experience in the nonprofit sector.

Habesha chooses its scholarship candidates through word-of-mouth advertising and charitable foundations. The selection criteria, which emphasize academic commitment and civic engagement, were at first only loosely applied. The organization was unknown, and applicants would be taking a leap of faith by moving to Mexico and joining the project. No age limit or other restrictions are established to filter out those who may need to support their family back home or be more interested in the stipend than in the scholarship. Sixteen individuals have been admitted since late 2015, although three have since dropped out after struggling academically or emotionally. The induction year is spent in Adrián’s hometown of Aguascalientes, a quiet provincial city in central Mexico. Here the students participate in a Spanish language and cultural immersion program before enrolling in an undergraduate or postgraduate degree of their preference—a choice that would have been unavailable to them in their native Syria.

Seeking Dignity

Habesha students are in their early twenties to early thirties, mostly men, from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Few in the group

are women, given cultural restrictions for Middle Eastern females to travel and live independently. Those who joined the project either had the support of their families or, like Silva,⁶ a 24-year-old Kurdish woman, married fellow Habesha student Jackdar in order to be able to travel. Prior to the war, some had dreamed of studying and traveling abroad. Hazem, for example, had hoped to attend university in Germany. But the eruption of the armed conflict interfered with the 28-year-old Kurdish man's language classes. Eventually they all fled economic hardship, forced conscription, or violence in Syria.

Stories about their lives as refugees stir up memories the students would rather forget—memories of lives turned upside down, of separation from family and friends, of the loss of homes. For some, what is etched in their mind is a thwarted sense of agency, a sense of hopelessness; for others, it is the bitter taste of discrimination they suffered in cities like Beirut. Twenty-year-old Amjad, who spent his exile in Yemen, remembers: "It was like pressing a pause button. You feel your life is on hold." Most of the Habesha students were urban or camp refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, or Iraq, where they made ends meet through informal labor or NGO jobs. All were anxious but unable to find a way out of their situation.

Silva, who spent five years with her family living and working in Iraq's Domiz camp, says: "We felt very desperate, because we didn't know what was going to happen to us. We lived in a tent. When it rained, everything got flooded. There was no kitchen, no bathroom. Not being able to study was the worst part for me. I felt I couldn't breathe, found it difficult to accept that this was my life." Some of the students had thought of making the treacherous journey to Germany, a country they saw as offering a strong economy, a first-rate education system, and a generous asylum system. But any possibilities to reassert control over their lives seemed out of reach until they heard about Habesha.

The Syrians had not anticipated, nor particularly desired, going to Mexico. The place was culturally and linguistically unfamiliar to most of them, and the idea of moving even farther away from family and friends caused some unease. Hazem, who is

studying business administration in Monterrey, says: "I had many doubts about Mexico. When I googled the country, I found only bad news, about the drug war, the 43 disappeared students. I was afraid to go to Mexico—thought I'd be going from one war zone to the next. But I really wanted to study, and when I finally got to Mexico and saw what it was like, I felt better."

Being part of Habesha allows the Syrians not only to continue their university education but also to create a new identity for themselves. They are aware of their refugee background and recognize that refugee status counts toward permanent residency. But to be seen as refugees is, for them, to be labeled with a stigmatized identity—an identity associated with famished, idle persons, or even with stories of asylum fraud and illicit behavior that have tainted entire nations. Able to redefine themselves as students, Habesha participants feel also able to restore a sense of dignity to their lives. Hazem, who spent more than two years in Iraqi Kurdistan, says: "When you're a refugee, people treat you like you're nothing. That's an ugly experience. I don't want people to look down on me, to think that I'm just waiting for handouts. I want them to understand that I come from a country at war, but that I don't want to fight. I want to live my life like anybody else."

By rejecting the refugee label, Habesha students miss a chance to highlight the diversity, skills, and resilience among displaced persons. The project, however, is for them primarily a unique opportunity to make a fresh start, far away from the prejudices and xenophobia Syrian refugees have encountered elsewhere. Amjad adds: "In Mexico people have no stereotypes about us. That encouraged me to come here. You can start on a blank page and write your own story."

Coming from a socially and religiously conservative society, Habesha participants find that Mexico offers them a newfound sense of freedom and independence. Some have struggled to adjust, while others relish the prospect of a less restrictive lifestyle. Silva, who is living in a different city than her husband, says: "The culture in Mexico is very different. Women here can live and travel by themselves. Syrian women tend to be raised

conservative. Before I got married, I had only ever lived with my parents, never by myself. I was not used to taking care of things on my own, because in my country men do that. This is very difficult for me. But it also makes you stronger as a woman, helps you understand more things.”

The students also note contrasts when it comes to freedom of religion. Amjad, for example, observes: “In Syria, the lifestyle is shaped by religion. Islam regulates people’s life from birth to death. It feels a little oppressive. In Mexico, you don’t feel watched what you’re doing, or judged when you don’t pray. There is more openness here. You decide if you want to drink, or if you want to have sexual relations outside marriage. This is part of our educational experience in Habesha. We’re not just getting a degree.”

Chasing Dreams

Generating sufficient resources for staff salaries, operational costs, and student stipends has proved Habesha’s biggest challenge. This is even trickier now that the Syrian war is ending and donor fatigue has set in. Without a long-term fund-raising strategy from the beginning, money needs to be solicited on a rolling basis. The difficulty of relying heavily on citizen donations, however, has required the organization to shift more to government and foundation grants. A developing partnership with UNHCR gives the project added credibility, but its financial situation remains tenuous.

Habesha invites its scholarship recipients to serve as goodwill ambassadors. Their testimonials can raise awareness of the plight of refugees and launch emotive fund-raising appeals. But this has met with resistance from the students. Some recognize that media interviews and public talks may provide networking and professional development opportunities. Others, however, value their privacy or believe that organizational income generation is not their responsibility. For the time being, Habesha’s unpredictable financial situation puts its scholarship program on uncertain footing.

The resource constraints have important repercussions for students and staff. The modest stipend, which was reduced when the initially

pledged amount proved unsustainable, is a source of friction in the project. The Syrians came to Mexico with huge expectations for a more comfortable existence. They feel disappointed at the cutback and struggle to live on a tight budget in a foreign country. Most attend private universities where the disparities between wealthy and less privileged students can produce feelings of alienation. Some of the Habesha grantees supplement their stipend by teaching Arabic classes or selling homemade Middle Eastern food. But the financial worries and informal work distract from academic studies.

Habesha’s funding constraints also make it difficult for the organization to recruit and retain qualified staff. The project relies on volunteers, often university students, for administrative and teaching support. Given the time commitment and lack of pay, the volunteers’ involvement tends to be fleeting and erratic. This affects the quality and consistency of the Spanish language provision and can delay Habesha participants’ university admission.

The grantees’ stories show how inconsistent applicant screening and limited funds can impair their academic performance and mental health. Imran, one of the first Habesha students, abandoned his postgraduate course after struggling psychologically and returned to war-ravaged Syria. Tarek, at 31 years one of the oldest of the cohort, had intermittently studied economics and worked odd jobs from a young age to support his family. He feels he has never been able to pursue his own dreams and joined Habesha largely for the financial support. As a mature student in Mexico he grappled to reconcile informal employment with the demands of his new educational setting. Tarek suffered recurrent nightmares and, after leaving the project, struggled to find work and housing. With mounting despair, and no valid passport, he fell back into using and dealing drugs.

Habesha offers many learning opportunities for staff and funders. They organization needs to ensure its sustainability and implement a more rigorous applicant screening. It also must carefully manage students’ expectations and provide them

with psychosocial care to help them deal with the trauma of displacement. Besides facilitating access to scholarships, the organization may collaborate more closely with universities so that they can better support refugee students academically and emotionally. Despite its imperfections and limited reach, Habesha responds to the need for refugee higher education and helps change the image of displaced persons. It invests in the human security of vulnerable populations at a time when restrictive visa policies and travel bans close many doors. Its real contribution, however, may be symbolic: Habesha allows its participants to recover dignity, to savor freedom, diversity, and human rights, and to dream their future and that of their country.

Note

* The names of some of the students were changed to protect their privacy.

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