Building solidarity through comparative lived experiences of post-conflict:
Reflections on two days of dialogue

👤 **Dina Belluigi**, Queen's University, Belfast

✉ d.belluigi@qub.ac.uk

👤 **Tom Parkinson**, University of Kent, United Kingdom

✉ t.parkinson@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

Occasions for in-depth dialogue among academics in times of conflict are rare. Drawing upon such a dialogue between Syrian academics and international counterparts from contexts undergoing conflict or grappling with post-conflict legacies, we identity seven dominant themes that emerged from these discussions and reflect on participants' strategic insights and mutual support, in addition to highlighting the consciousness that was raised around the agency, limitations, complicity and intergenerational legacies borne by academics and the academy in crisis contexts.

Key Words

Syrian academics

Conflict

Exile

Academic collaboration

Introduction

The scale of destruction and displacement caused by the Syrian crisis has been unprecedented in recent decades, as have the challenges faced by Syrian academics working within conflict areas inside Syria and those displaced beyond Syria's borders. As academics, their authority, networks and skills to document and question unfolding events, as the informed voices of their communities and societies, place them at risk. Yet international investment in their protection, development and participation is noticeably absent, despite the acknowledged role of higher education (HE) in post-war recovery (Milton and Barakat, 2016). Academics are central to the social formation and knowledge-production of their societies, and experience the additional emotional labour of moral responsibility for often traumatised and fragmented families and communities. While such expectations and experiences are known to those on the ground, the international research community has arguably neglected its responsibility to bring their conflict-affected counterparts' experiences to light, and to support their growth, voice, and contributions to the knowledge produced about their countries and peoples. Knowledge and academia are areas not often explored in research on conflict and its legacies (Millican *et al*., 2011), while the development and NGO community has largely focused their educational interventions on children and young people.

As an initiative to support the displaced Syrian academic community currently exiled in the Middle East region to sustain their academic work, networks and development, Cara (Council for At Risk Academics) established a dedicated Syria Programme in 2016. The curriculum of this programme has consciously deviated from

mainstream academic development approaches rooted in understandings of 'best practice' within resource-rich global North HE sectors, and which are commonly aligned with institutional or national educational norms and quality assurance standards (see Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2019). Rather, the Syria Programme follows an action research design rooted in ongoing reflective and deliberative dialogue and community planning, supported by formal data collection activities. Data collection methods include large group processes, focus groups, one-to-one interviews and surveys used to elicit insights into the contextually-specific academic development needs of over 150 Syrian academics living in exile (predominantly in Turkey). These processes have informed a participant-driven academic development agenda (see Parkinson, 2018; Parkinson, McDonald and Quinlan, 2019).

Ongoing reflection and consideration of findings have revealed numerous interwoven challenges affecting exiled Syrian academics' ability to engage in academic work, including: isolation from disciplinary communities; lack of institutional affiliation, which in turn limits access to resources; deskilling due to inactivity; and cultural, linguistic and other communication barriers. To mitigate some of these challenges, participants have requested capacity building support in areas including teaching and learning, research design and methods, and English for Academic Purposes. However, more substratal and affective complexities associated with being an academic in exile have also emerged, including experiences of hostility from host populations (and host academic communities in particular); psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress; anxiety surrounding precarious legal status; and lack of trust among some groups of Syrian academics in exile, which in some instances relate to pre-existing ethnic, regional or sectarian tensions. Moreover, while specific cities in the host country of Turkey, such as Gaziantep, are home to large numbers of Syrian academics and thus serve as hubs for activity, many Syrian academics are dispersed throughout Turkey, and often face travel restrictions that limit opportunities for networking. Participants have spoken of feeling overwhelmed by these cumulative challenges, and ill-equipped to face them.

Garnering solidarity from the international academic community has consistently emerged as a priority for Syria Programme participants. However, while

the Programme has generated significant support from international academics, facilitating networking activities and brokering several ongoing partnerships, this has largely occurred between Syrian participants and UK-based academics who facilitate academic development activities or collaborate in research projects, thus inevitably entailing a North–South disparity in resources and experiences.

Syrian participants have asked specifically to be connected with counterparts from other countries that have experienced conflict and displacement. UK-based academics facilitating the Programme have, in turn, been struck by the extent to which the circumstances of Syrian colleagues differ from those working in resource-rich, peacetime, global North contexts, and have been concerned about their own capacity to facilitate meaningful academic development. Thus, a pressing need has emerged to seek input from academics with comparable, complex experiences, and/or whose work has involved reckoning with the legacies of conflict, oppression or displacement in other parts of the world. It was hoped, too, that international colleagues would themselves value an opportunity to share their experiences and reflect on these complex issues. As detailed in the methodology (below), a two-day event comprising roundtables and workshops was organised to bring together such contributors.

Crucial to these interactions was a shared commitment to honest dialogue and reflection, and a space in which disagreements and dissonance would be accommodated and worked through respectfully. Contributors were identified on the basis that their experience of being an academic, or knowledge of academia and the university in post-conflict, would enhance the range of perspectives and potential for comparative insights. The selection of contributors was inclusive of both experiential knowledge gained from lived experience, and knowledge generated through scholarship.

Informed by their own academic development and scholarship (see Belluigi, 2012, Parkinson *et al*., 2018), the organisers were aware that to create a conducive environment required 'the right emotional tone under which authentic discourse can occur' (Brookfield, 1995: 27). Principles which informed the events were hospitality, to provide a sense of temporary shelter, protection and nurturing of those

present; safety, where an accepting and respectful climate (and assurances of confidentiality) would allow for unstructured, non-typical discussions by participants as they come to voice about complex and controversial issues; and a conviction that empathy, openness and self-reflection would engender solidarity between different participants, perspectives, memories and contexts.

Methodology

Roundtable and workshop event

At a two-day event held in Istanbul on the 21st and 22nd June 2019, 11 Syrian academics gathered together with 7 counterparts from (or working in) Belarus, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kenya, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Serbia and South Africa, together with 3 UK academics participating in the Syria Programme, and 2 Cara representatives. The impetus and rationale for this event emerged from meta-analyses of data generated from interviews, focus group discussions and group processes with the participation of Syrian academics, conducted between 2017 and 2019 as part of the Cara Syria Programme. The event was conducted under the Chatham House Rule[1] to encourage free expression, with explicit assurances that comments made during the event would not be attributed to any one individual once the event was over. Simultaneous translation in English and Arabic was provided throughout, with translations transcribed anonymously. Full transcripts from the discussion over two days were subsequently analysed following a thematic analysis approach, enabling the identification of the dominant themes discussed below. Due to the risk posed to many of the participants we have taken additional care to obscure their identities and excluded verbatim quotations.

In order to promote exploratory discussion and to enable emerging themes to be pursued, the event was structured loosely. Formal engagements in roundtable discussions and breakaway workshops occurred during the day, which then continued informally over organised shared meals and social activities in the evening. The first morning was given over to establishing shared aims and objectives, and context setting about the Syrian academic crisis. Following introductions by all contributors and general discussion around the issue of HE and conflict, participants were placed into smaller working groups to allow for more in-depth discussions around issues that emerged in the round. At the end of the morning, rapporteurs offered topical summaries of each group's discussions, which were subsequently synthesised into a list of common themes and issues to take forward for discussions about possible solutions in the afternoon. The second day comprised a combination of breakout sessions dedicated to particular themes which had been identified as salient from the previous day, with broader discussion in the round towards the end.

While working towards consensus is a common aim of workshops and similar gatherings, here, it was accepted that contributors differed in their expectations and motivations for the event, and held varied and particular contextual understandings and experiences of the issues under discussion. Some maintained throughout that their knowledge and experiences were rooted in the unique contingencies of their particular context, and that generalisability was not necessarily possible, nor desirable. We emphasise therefore that while we offer our reflections on some dominant emerging themes, we cannot fully account for the range of contributors' perspectives within this short piece. More nuanced engagements with these themes are being drafted, co-authored by those participants who have identified they have the affordance to be named without risk.

Under the conditions of conflict: Brokering and relational expertise

The challenge of maintaining academic community cohesion under conditions of conflict emerged as a shared concern. Contributors spoke of breakdowns in trust that could inflame existing tensions, engender new divisions, and lead to impasse in planning and decision-making. Because many pre-conflict institutional or sectoral structures had broken down, Syrian participants reported that efforts to organise or

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[1]Developed to create the conditions for debate with an understanding of the protections of anonymity and non-attribution, this global standard communicates the understanding that interactions conducted under the rule allow for participants 'to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed' (Chatham House, 2020: np)

work collaboratively outside of those structures often became mired in inter-group suspicion and could quickly become (or be perceived to have become) politicised. Many participants identified the need for external (i.e. non-Syrian) brokers to facilitate dialogue and provided the example of the positive role Cara had played in creating opportunities for collaboration around common priorities.

Many of the Syrian contributors expressed high expectations for Cara's role in brokering dialogue among Syrian academics in exile, providing a collective organisational identity and affiliation (in the absence of institutional oversight), and representing Syrian academics internationally. Cara representatives expressed concern about the sustainability of such expectations however, drawing from lessons learnt in the case of Iraq where initial successes proved unsustainable once Cara stepped away from its mediating role. This discussion highlighted a need for greater capacity building in sustainable models of collaboration among academics in exile, in addition to support from international partners, to mitigate against risks of dependency.

A pressing concern related to access for, and invisibility of, women academics. The single female Syrian academic present noted that the majority of currently practising academics in the non-regime areas of Syria were women. While the group discussed about various levels of risk faced by academics who were displaced and living in exile, women academics, in particular, faced significantly higher probability of losing their status both during and after the conflict, due to gendered biases and expectations. Concerns arose about the barriers to access for women academics, both outside of Syria and within its borders, including those who were maintaining the teaching component of the sector and those who had suspended their academic careers to support those of their spouses. Their continuous development as academics and their wellbeing were identified as in need of research and attention, echoing the findings of a study on Syrian women educators in Lebanon (Adelman, 2019). It was also acknowledged that women academics were conspicuously underrepresented on the Cara Syria Programme. Ongoing consultation has suggested a number of possible reasons for this, including: cultural expectations that women prioritise domestic care responsibilities; women's reluctance

to travel to Syria Programme events alone; a desire among Syrian women academics to build capacity in teaching-focused, rather than research-focused, activities; and women academics not being made aware of the opportunities presented by the Syria Programme, due to Cara's reliance on word of mouth promotion within a society that is in large part gender-segregated. In response to this issue Cara has made provision for travel and accommodation at workshops for women academics' accompanying family members, made increased use of online spaces to facilitate networking, incorporated a greater provision of teaching-focused development opportunities, and actively created research opportunities in disciplinary areas where women academics are more represented, and in relation to issues experienced by Syrian women. These steps have resulted in an encouraging uplift in women's participation recently, though much work remains to be done.

In addition, the Syrian contributors called for protection and support in safeguarding Syria's intellectual heritage, and in educating young Syrians both inside the country and in exile. Many felt they were largely unheard, misunderstood or let down by the international community of scholars, and their fatigue from struggling to muster support was palpable.

An irony was that during the days of the roundtable, a global declaration of academic freedom and institutional autonomy was made at the Council of Europe (2019) by international bodies largely unresponsive to academics such as these, in whose experience, such concepts were largely mythological.

Calls for international involvement, networks and recognition

Discussions around the theme of recognition encompassed challenges relating to the lack of formal accreditation of HE providers in non-regime areas, but also lack of recognition—in the softer sense of acknowledgement of the plight of Syrian academia, and the value and expertise of Syrian academics in exile—by the international academic community.

Syrian contributors returned again and again to their sense of moral responsibility for the HE of their people. They expressed frustration with the misrecognition of the HE sector in conflict under

international law, highlighting that academic populations in liberated areas suffered greater delegitimisation than those in regime-control areas. Their insights evoked concerns about how the moral authority of the right to access to HE, of Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is complicated by the limited recognition of refugees' right to HE (Gilchrist, 2018) and the lack of both protection and accreditation for those institutions, programmes of study and academics operating within areas which do not fall under the sovereignty of the nation-state as recognised by the United Nations, such as those within 'non-regime'/'liberated' areas of Syria.

A number of proposals were mooted to address their concerns about a lost generation and harm to the Syrian academic heritage. However, UK colleagues expressed caution about the labour, time and expense of seeking international accreditation for institutions and programmes, when bodies and institutions would be risk averse and unlikely to accredit provision without seeing evidence of sustainability and quality assurance. There were different opinions concerning whether formal recognition was a prerequisite for establishing new universities in liberated areas, or whether pursuing recognition was a distraction and a drain on resources.

Colleagues from Palestine and Belarus spoke of their own experiences in this regard. They described how starting small and establishing a sustainable modicum of academic activity had enabled institutions to grow as conditions and circumstances allowed. One contributor questioned whether formal recognition was even desirable, since seeking recognition implicitly acknowledged the authority and legitimacy of those conferring it – whether oppressive regimes within the country or opportunistic external parties with neoliberal, expansionist tendencies. An argument was made for drafting indigenous criteria for legitimacy, to uphold academic autonomy and to support authentic and culturally relevant, rather than (neo)colonial, academic activities. However, it was acknowledged that this required commitment to a common cause, leading to robust debate that placed the following question at the heart of the event:

Is it possible or desirable to depoliticise higher education?

Divergent views emerged around the possibilities and desirability of HE, and academics themselves, being a political. Reflecting a strong conviction that HE could play a unique role in the resolution of and recovery from conflict (see Millican, 2018; Milton and Barakat, 2016), the majority of Syrian contributors asserted the importance of establishing an authoritative, non-partisan organisation to represent the HE interests of the country as a whole. This was in the hope of unifying all factions around seemingly neutral, laudable aims such as supporting a skilled workforce and ensuring pedagogic quality, and to regain some credibility of academic autonomy and stability in the face of over 8 years of loss in the academic sector.

Many international contributors, both from currently oppressed contexts such as, Belarus and Palestine and post-conflict contexts such as, Bosnia, Serbia and South Africa, perceived such an apolitical stance to be impossible. A number of contributors argued that avoiding a political stance in the midst of conflict could mute the academic voice of the oppressed, diminishing the likelihood of motivating the international community to respond. A schism emerged, largely between contributors from post-conflict contexts and those from Syria, the former asserting that HE was inherently and necessarily political, and the latter asserting that it was essential to organise and act collectively outside of political distinctions, to formulate a powerful and credible academic voice and to address the risk of another lost generation. These discussions converged with debates concerning what Bush and Saltarelli (2000) refer to as the 'two faces' of education in conflict – its capacity for inclusion, reconciliation and recovery, but also its complicity in oppression, division and cultural erasure. It is possible that owing to the urgency of the current crisis and threats to their own existence within the precarious political climates of Turkey and Syria, the conditions were not conducive for the Syrian academics to begin to conceive of agonistic possibilities, where conflict is recognised as a necessary, desirable feature of democratic politics (Mouffe, 2013).

The complicity of academia/academics in conflict

Contributors from Bosnia, Serbia and South Africa offered poignant accounts of living in contexts where academics' complicity in, or silence about conflict and oppression were a continued concern. Bosnian and Serbian contributors shared at length stories about the distrust and suspicion caused by post-conflict academic climates where the past continues to haunt the present, possibly because complicity in atrocities and oppression during the period of conflict were not reckoned with and continue to be overlooked within existing networks. Citing calls made as recently as 2018 for a truth and reconciliation committee for South African academia (Pather, 2018), one academic spoke of the continued haunting of that country's academic climate due to a lack of belief in universities as just spaces, and contrasted that with the righteous cause that academics-in-exile harnessed to further freedom and democracy in that context. Offering a provocative perspective from academia within a sector that had evolved and adapted amidst decades of social and political turmoil (Zelkovitz, 2014), a Palestinian contributor argued that HE should promote critical thinking of an explicitly political nature and be unapologetic in its emancipatory agenda.

Over the course of these discussions, it became apparent that much remained unsaid, as different points in the history of conflict and in Syrian contributors' positionality, and political perspectives, were left outside of the room. Positive experiences of working with Cara, a self-declared neutral organisation (Cara, 2017), had influenced the Syrian academics who elsewhere had found political orientations (or various other markers of identification and difference) to have a divisive influence and impede progress.

Pathological understanding of conflict can impede progress and reconciliation

Contributors offered insights into approaches to addressing conflict in their own contexts, and the ways in which such policies and discursive orientations operated on the ground. As much as the international contributors were concerned about the human cost of the continued conflict in Syria, a number sought to share lessons of peace processes. The Northern Ireland case was cited for its suspension of conflict as stasis, and the ways in which much of the past was as yet unreckoned, with divisions remaining as a result. Similarly, the authoritarian stasis of Belarus was seen as problematic for a healthy democracy and academic freedom.

Participants from Bosnia and South Africa warned against uncomfortable histories being glossed over in education, and recounted instances of unresolved trauma arising intermittently from the minutiae of curricula. From South Africa and Palestine came a sense of the generative possibilities of conflict as ways to resist the oppressive reproductive machinery of the status quo, and achieve clarity of academic mission. It was suggested that approaching conflict as a pathology to be cured, rather than a symptom of deeper pathologies or even a costly but necessary cure, could defer rather than resolve problems.

Resources exist, but are inaccessible

Syrian academics in exile often lack institutional affiliation or work at the margins of the HE sector on precarious contracts. All the Syrian contributors expressed their frustrations with having to conform to the expectations of the global HE sector that, de facto, bars or obstructs their academic participation. They cited examples which ranged from non-institutional email addresses being routinely rejected as suspicious; prohibitive expenses for submitting their research dissemination to publishing houses or when accessing journal articles; educational resources, professional membership registrations and academic social media platforms which require institutional affiliation for access and/ or inclusion; through to limited access to funding and the necessary conditions to undertake research and education for their people.

A desire was expressed for authoritative online platforms or centres, to enable the Syrian academics to archive, market and assert themselves, with a number of technology-related solutions proposed and explored. An intended focus of the event was to identify accessible resources pertinent to operating in low-resource developing contexts. While it was clear that valuable resources exist, many are inaccessible due to paywalls and other access requirements. It was agreed that establishing a repository of useful

Open Access resources would be a valuable first step towards an accessible resource base, and that concerted lobbying of institutions and professional bodies might lead to opportunities for access and support.

Being in exile: dialogue and representation

Contributors agreed that opportunities for dialogue away from the heat of crisis allowed for the meaning and value of academic work to be reconsidered and reimagined. A number of contributors recounted how encountering those from across a conflict divide in a third country could throw shared experience into relief; some spoke of being able to engage with other exiled academics from their regions at an individual level, and thereby acknowledge shared humanity above ethnic, political, regional or tribal distinctions.

Moreover, there was agreement concerning the duty of exiled academics to speak about and on behalf of oppressed compatriots, using their positions and affordances to highlight concerns to the international community. Reflecting on the post-conflict developments in their own countries, international contributors paid tribute to the intellectual leadership of academics who had exercised their political agency to mobilise against authoritarian regimes while in exile, and were later able to contribute to nation-building, development, and truth and reconciliation initiatives when peace was negotiated. The exile-as-witness emerged as both a generative position but also a burden of representation. Among others, Edward Said (2000) theorised the exile as one who exists in the overlapping territories between the 'old' empire, the current crisis, and the 'new' state, in a condition of tensions, irresolution, and contradiction. Such marginality and positioning within time thresholds holds the potential for an émigré consciousness to emerge among intellectuals, whose life experiences and sense of obligation 'for the hopeless' is generative when balanced with 'a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern (Adorno, 1951: 67-8, cited in Said, 1993: 404).

Contributors were not naïve about the politics of representation and political activism within academia. A number of the contributors from post-conflict contexts chose to describe at length the tensions between academics that still festered decades after the cessation of armed conflict. They noted how tensions between often divisive identities, networks and allegiances characterised academics in post-conflict contexts, including those academics who had attained political reputation and professional capital while in exile; those who had remained in their country, who perceived themselves as having 'weathered the storm' of state assault within but had become deskilled; those who were seen to have colluded with oppressive regimes and/or participated in the state surveillance of academics, institutions and student activists; in addition to those who avoided political involvement and were accused of averting their gaze. Even the younger academics present, who had not themselves experienced academic life under conditions of exile or conflict, described residual toxic atmospheres characterised by suspicion, distrust and factionalism that persisted as a legacy of their older colleagues' experiences, and the hidden dynamics of post-conflict academia.

Although the intrinsic value of dialogue was acknowledged by all, there was a sense of scepticism among some of the Syrian participants about whether such dialogue could make any timely or material difference to those currently enduring conflict. They asserted that formal, action-oriented collaborations, particularly those leading to some form of international recognition, were urgently needed.

Concluding reflections

The event discussed in this reflection was developed in response to the desire, expressed by Syrian academics within the Cara Syria Programme, to connect with international colleagues from whom they might learn about sustaining academic life during crisis. The role of dialogue during this process was intended as a tool to facilitate collaborative learning amongst academic colleagues and researchers, and to bridge the gaps which a formal curriculum could not address.

As the HE sector is caught in tidal waves of change globally, the event offered a moment of solidarity for those conscious of the limits and affordances of academic agency, responsibility and privilege during conflict, crisis and in its aftermath. Reservations notwithstanding, the dialogue resulted in unintended learning of reciprocal value. Beyond the pragmatic and theoretical aspects of the discussions, contributors' reflections on their lived experiences

placed the affective domain at centre stage. While some of the contributors were researchers of HE and of conflict, the shared understanding of the value of this domain allowed for the gravitas of responsibility, and of trauma, to be present within the discussions. Syrian contributors all reported that this short event had helped them to process their experiences and given them motivations and a strategic direction. This feeling was reciprocated by international contributors, some of whom had never spoken of their experiences to audiences outside of their own countries, if at all. All reported to have found the experience of sharing to be profoundly beneficial professionally, intellectually and emotionally, and to have been inspired in turn by the resilience and resourcefulness of Syrian academics in exile.

Clearly evident were the limitations of such a short-lived interaction. The possibilities of academics' influence within their institutions and the HE sector at large, seemed dwarfed by the distant magnitude of larger geopolitical processes

and actors at the macro-level. There was a tacit awareness that direct discussion of political activism by Syrian academics was too risky, despite careful protocols and secure location. Moreover, misgivings about the possibilities for the timely and material impact of research on post-conflict HE, and on critical academic development specifically, were expressed across the board. Despite these limitations, the event stimulated several ongoing collaborative initiatives.

Author Bios

Dina Belluigi is Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences, Queen's University, Belfast, and Research Associate in the Centre for the Study of Higher Education Transformation, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

Tom Parkinson is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Kent, UK.

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