

From Books to Bombs to Books

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Inside one man's 2 year journey from Syria to Greece to Germany



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Hassan Alhomse, age 22 (Photo: Manadath)[/caption]

Introduction

Hassan Alhomse was no stranger to death. His family and friends were being killed by the Syrian Regime, Russian, and American forces. All around him, death was the norm, and bombs were background noise, but he wants me to know that Syria was not always this dangerous. Hassan's home was not always covered in blood. It all started in 2011, inspired by the ideals of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries, an increasing number of Syrians took to the streets. Peaceful demands for political and economic rights quickly gave way to violence from the Syrian Regime and foreign governments (Jabbar & Zaza, 2014). Countless lives have been lost in this 6 year conflict and with recent American imperial- esque involvement, there seems to be no end in sight.

Despite these tribulations, Hassan, like so many Syrians, remains determined to continue his education; knowledge is one thing that the Syrian Revolution relies on and the Regime can never take away. For refugees, the journey of continuing a disrupted higher education involves unconventional externalities, such as post-war trauma and social programs of resettlement countries that must be navigated with finesse. A challenge in the journey is mitigating the disruption that occurs in higher education, when Syrians are forced to flee the Regime. 330,000 of the 5.1 million Syrian refugees are between 12-17 - the age when higher education becomes a reality or an unattainable dream (Jacobs, 2016).

Pre-migration: Syria

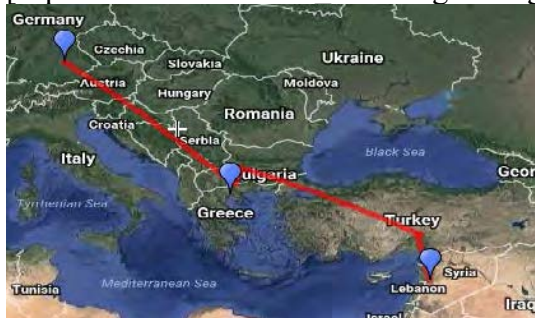
“Homs was a vibrant city. It is the only home I have ever known. That’s why I decided to stay there for Uni as well,” remarked Hassan (H. Alhomse, personal communication, April 15th, 2017), via Whatsapp Video Call.

Hassan studied at Al-Baath University, a few miles away from his home. He recounts that his family has always valued education and now that he is without it, he feels empty. Now all the students have been displaced or killed, says Hassan. Hassan himself left Homs 2 years ago, at the age of 24, and has not been back since. Instead, he crossed the Mediterranean and lived in a Greek refugee camp for two years, and later was smuggled to Germany where he now attends university again. Hassan’s decision to leave was a hard one, he recounts.

“Syria is my love...if all the young people leave, who will be there to rebuild it when the revolution is over? I will go back the day the war ends. I must go back,” he says.

Hassan adds that his determination to go back is because he does not want his beloved home to experience “brain drain,” which is the emigration of highly trained or intelligent people from a particular country. While waiting to return home, he is continuing his education and learning the art of photography. In Homs, Hassan was studying English Literature. We discuss a shared favorite book, *The Alchemist*, before moving onto the next question.

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Hassan’s 2 year journey (Graphic:

Manadath)[/caption]

While Hassan's pursuit of higher education is one that leaves room for hope, not all refugees are in the same boat. Many Syrians expected the crisis to be resolved in a few months. The reality has left them on a path of downward mobility, as months turn into years and the only constant in refugees’ lives is desperation. It is estimated that 100,000 Syrian refugees have had their higher education disrupted by the 6-year civil war (Redden, 2016). Whereas, before the conflict began, about a quarter of Syrian high school graduates went on to university. Now, there is no data on how many Syrians go on to university because most universities in Syria are not operating. In addition to many of the universities being bombed or closed by ISIS, approximately 2,000 academics have fled since the war began (Jacobs, 2016). Hassan's worries of “brain drain” are corroborated by these statistics.

Hassan’s life was turned upside down the day he left Syria by boat to seek asylum in Greek refugee camps.

Year 1: Greece

While in the camps, Hassan's education took a pitfall. With little to no resources to continue his education, he was forced to put it on pause. Instead, he read books to keep his mind sharp and practiced taking photos to keep his mind happy. However, living in a camp did take an emotional toll on him and he reveals that even when NGO's set up makeshift classrooms for language classes in the camps, they were not well- attended. Hassan revealed that at times, the hopelessness became overwhelming and he struggled with his mental health. As Hassan explained, he was "a prisoner in the camp and a prisoner in my own mind."

Hassan is just one of millions of people who have fought a psychological battle after escaping a literal one; exposure to war and violence increases rates of mental illness. According to a German based cross sectional study, 15%-20% of refugees have a mild to moderate mental illness. Most of these diagnoses are depression, anxiety, and post traumatic stress disorder (Jabbar & Zaza, 2014). The traumatic pre- migration experiences, resulting in a diagnosed mental illness or not, and the dismal conditions of the refugee camps must be addressed before education can become a positive tool. Typically, Syrian refugees live in camp for at least a year before resettlement (Gearan, 2014). This waiting period is at least one year of fighting a mental battle while knowing that other components of life such as education, health, starting or living with family, are all slipping away. If refugee camps are not equipped to address basic needs such as food and water, let alone the dismal mental health of refugees, any type of education is futile (Marquardt et al., 2015).

Conversely, education can serve as a sources of resilience, but more so in permanent asylum granting countries. According to a psychiatric study, among young refugees who had resettled in Western countries, social support, acculturation strategies, education, religion, avoidance, and hope were the six most promising factors that helped alleviate mental health disorders (Sleijpen et al., 2015). Narrowing in on education, it is clear why education may serve as a positive light in the lives of refugees. Education provides consistency in lives that have not known it for so long. Additionally, education preoccupies the mind with new information and inspires ideas, which is beneficial to a mind that survived war. Education is also inherently social, as it provides a common area for students to mingle and study together. Given that the majority of Syrian refugees are Muslim, they are aware of the importance of attaining education in Islam; the first word of the Quran is "read" (Rizvi, 1993). In essence, education is the common thread that ties together the 6 sources of resilience for refugees.

"It is easy to lose focus of education in the camps when you are focused on surviving. When you don't have enough food or water...education is the last thing on your mind. The environment matters...that is why I had a hard time focusing on education in the camp. In Germany, it seems like the right place and right time," Hassan says candidly.

Hassan's views are in line with Maslow's pyramid hierarchy of needs. Maslow stated that "people are motivated to achieve certain needs and that some needs take precedence over others. Our most basic need is for physical survival, and this need will be the first thing that motivates our behaviour" (McLeod, 2016). Once that level is fulfilled the next level up is what motivates us, and so on. In other words, bombs disrupt the acquisition of knowledge, and refugees such as Hassan fall back to the bottom of the pyramid, taking books with them. Thus, the low-education, high poverty cycle is perpetuated within the camps, and only a few make it out of the cycle when they leave the camps. For many refugees, breaking the cycle and the resettling in a supportive country

go hand in hand (Crea & McFarland, 2015). Apart from the inadequate resources in camps to provide refugees with education and break the aforementioned cycle, there is a lingering question - "Why educate refugees in camps if they can't work in the host country?" (Crea & McFarland, 2015). Both host governments, and refugees recognize the little return on investment that comes with being educated in a refugee camp. This reluctance is why if refugees do go on to complete higher education, it is done in entirety in a country that grants refugees permanent asylum rather than in a host country such as Greece.

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Hassan's tent is on the far right (Photo: Alhomse)[/caption]

One year later, Hassan embarked on another dangerous journey from Greece to Germany, on foot.

Year 2: Germany

Hassan's journey to Germany was calculated in order for him to continue his higher education. Germany is a country that offers free college tuition, and there are many education programs to aid refugees who wish to continue their education. Thus, Hassan is currently enrolled in the University of Heidelberg and has completed his first semester of German language courses.

Not all refugees are able to pursue this path. Syrian refugees who end up in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are restricted by the costs as well as the countries giving priority to its citizens (Crea & McFarland, 2015). In refugee camps, while formal education is not present, there is an informal exchange of information that shapes the decisions of refugees' immediate futures. Hassan recounts how he learned about which country to seek asylum in based on their generous social programs:

"Within the camps, many of the discussions revolve around which countries are the best to seek asylum in. Everyone wants to go to Germany or Sweden. For me, I wanted Germany because my brother is there, also enrolled in Uni. No one wants to go France because they are racist there...I have heard. Spain is poor, so it gives little welfare to refugees. America would be great but that is for the lucky few. The American dream, huh? Basically, Germany and Sweden provide the best

opportunities for me, and a top priority for me was continuing my education. I didn't study in Homs for 2 years for nothing,” says Hassan.

After hearing Hassan's testimony about Germany, I researched the higher education opportunities available for refugees there. According to Germany’s Federal Ministry of Education and Research, once refugee status is recognized by the government, refugees are able to enroll in University just like any other international student. There exist a number of ways to verify qualifications if documents are missing and many free German language courses are offered at community centers to cover the language requirement (Noak, 2016). Along with the low to zero tuition rates in Germany, refugees can obtain government funding to cover the remaining costs with a program called Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz or “BAföG” for short. About 60 universities across Germany partake in the program and some universities even cover travel and book expenses (Noak, 2016). The education ministry has found it to be a moral obligation to educate refugees who enter Germany.

"Migration is a task for all of society, and universities must do their part,” University of Hildesheim President Wolfgang-Uwe Friedrich told Handelsblatt, a German newspaper.

While countries like Germany recognize the moral obligation to educate refugees, there lies another reason which shows how host countries can reap the benefits of educating refugees. For instance, Germany, like many European countries, has an aging population. This demographic trend means that the number of people in the workforce is decreasing, which will eventually result in a shrinking economy (Adam, 2015). Here is where refugees become an asset, not a burden: most refugees are children and young adults and middle aged adults who can fill in the gaps in the labor force. The more educated a labor force is, the better off the country as a whole (Adam, 2015). Similarly, many media reports from refugee camps have featured young professionals who not only speak English, but also express their interest to continue their education and build a career, which has been interrupted by forcible displacement (Wit & Altbach, 2016). Therefore, countries like Germany recognize the return on investment in opening up paths to higher education for refugees, even if they do preliminarily require more support than the average citizen.

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View from Hassan's apartment in Southern Germany (Photo: Alhomse)[/caption]

These benefits make it why Germany is a popular country for refugees to seek asylum in. This search for a better life is why many refugees end up paying smugglers to take them across Europe, all the way to Germany. In 2015 alone, there were 500,000 asylum claims in Germany with 140,910 being approved that year. For comparison, in the same year, 100,000 asylum claims were made in the neighboring country of France (BBC, 2016). The asylum approval statistic highlights the lengthy approval period present even in countries with great welfare systems like Germany. Hassan was smuggled through Spain to Germany, but denied to provide details, citing legal reasons.

“How I got here is not important. The fact is that I am here and I am being treated with humanity. My family is reunited and I am finally back in school. My life has taken a 360 turn and I owe it to first and foremost God but also Germany for being so supportive,” says Hassan. In many ways, Germany is where Hassan's story begins again. It is where he once again, opened a book and could finally put the trauma of the last 6 years behind him.

The moral obligation of a country is a topic of debate when it comes to the higher education of refugees. For countries such as Germany, the moral obligation may appear clearer given that it is a wealthy country. Does this moral obligation hold true for second and third world countries? According to International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, supporting social and economic rights for displaced persons, especially the right to gainful employment, is required of host countries (Sinha et. al., 2012). This requirement makes no mention of the financial capabilities of host countries to provide support. If accepting and aiding refugees was based on GDP of a nation, Jordan and Turkey would not be hosting approximately 3 million Syrian refugees within their borders (UNHCR, 2016). Thus, countries such as Germany have a greater moral obligation given their monetary resources compared to countries such as Jordan and Turkey. However, the global community should take note that although Turkey and Jordan have lower GDP's, they welcome refugees with open arms. Therefore, no country should be exempt from accepting and aiding refugees, but countries with higher GDP's should bear a larger responsibility than they currently do.

“*Wallahi**, if moral obligations were dependent on GDP, Qatar, an Arab state with an extremely high GDP, should be hosting more than zero refugees. Jordan, which is a second world country, should be hosting zero,” asserts Hassan.

Two years and three countries later, Hassan has finally found peace—but his journey does not end here.

What's next?

Hassan's story, while inspiration, is not unique. There is a generation of college-aged young adults leaving Syria. They live in refugee camps and go on to seek asylum in safer countries, just like Hassan. What determines success for these young people is the attainment of higher education. Higher education transforms the downward mobility in refugee camps to upward mobility in the asylum-granting country. In many ways, higher education is the golden ticket to economic mobility for refugees, who tend to pursue employable, well-paying majors. Economic mobility translates to many other positive outcomes: opportunities for career advancement, ability to maintain a healthier

lifestyle, higher rates of civic engagement, lower rates of crime, and higher rates of overall well-being of next generation (Ma et al., 2016). The bottom line is this simple fact: education is something that the Syrian Revolution relies on and the Regime can never take away. Revolution has two meanings to Syrian refugees: the freedom of Syria from an oppressive regime and the freedom of the mind after the trauma of fleeing a war zone.

The narrative of Syrians seeking higher education should not include the word “bombs,” but it does. Will these bombs be the defining factor, or will books, once again, save the day?

The answer for Hassan is books.

“The Regime took everything from me...my family, my friends, my home, my country, my will to keep going at times...but not my education. That is one thing I will never give up. No one can touch that,” he says.

While it may seem counterintuitive, Hassan considers himself one of the lucky ones. He was able to escape the war zone, soldier through living in a refugee camp, and safely leave the refugee camp. He was granted asylum in Germany and continued his higher education. However comfortable his life in Germany may seem, Hassan remains determined to go back to his homeland when the war is over. Until then, he will continue studying, spending time with family, reading books, and perfecting the art of photography.

It took 6 years for the world to start caring about Syria and Syrians. There is a generation of hopeful refugees that escaped one war and has yet to find humanity. Let us not take another 6 years to recognize the importance of higher education for Syrian refugees, *InshaAllah**

*Wallahi: I swear by God-a commonly used word in Arabic conveying conviction.
*Inshallah: If God wills it-a commonly used word in Arabic conveying hopefulness.

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