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## The seeds of discontent: examining youth perceptions of higher education in Syria

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This article examines young Syrians' perceptions of higher education after the 2001 reforms, which expanded access to higher education and permitted the establishment of private universities. Data come from in-depth interviews conducted with 22 Syrians residing in Damascus, aged 18–32 in 2009. Analysis indicates youth are critical of the higher education system broadly, and that their discontent stems from two sources: (1) the high level of state involvement in determining youth life paths when uncoupled from labour market security; and (2) the perceived unfairness in university admissions stemming from connections and new forms of privatisation. This youth discontent reflects a larger rejection of the state's role in the higher education admissions process. Given Syria's long-term commitment to a model of state-led development in the post-independence era, the failure of the Syrian state to successfully link expanded higher education to secure employment in the neo-liberal era has contributed to a de-legitimisation of the Syrian state as a whole in the eyes of its youth.

### Higher education and the Arab state

After World War II, newly independent Arab states were economically underdeveloped and politically repressive – they staked their legitimacy in their ability to foster national development and improve citizens' standard of living (Anderson 1987; Bashshur 1966). Young Arab states were highly involved in guiding young people's path through formal education and into the labour market. Most created a direct pathway from university to public-sector employment as part of a larger state-led mobility system (Anderson 1987). The development model was one of national manpower planning; state-based sorting of youth was justified in meritocratic claims, as early higher education reforms claimed to counter colonialist legacies that reserved higher education for the wealthy and well connected.

This Arab model of state-led development was largely inspired by the Nasser-era reforms in Egypt, passed in the wake of the 1952 popular revolution (Cupito and Langsten 2011; Howard-Merriam 1979; Rugh 2002). Following Egypt's lead, Arab nations rushed to establish large national universities, outlaw tuition fees, guarantee high school graduates admission to university, and promise university graduates employment in the public sector as part of a national charter (Abrahart, Kaur, and Tzannatos 2002; Cohen 2004; Teixeira 2009).

Universities became important national symbols of progress in this era by linking the citizen's socio-economic mobility to the state's development. For citizens, attending university and entering the public sector became a pathway to social mobility,

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eventually viewed as an important element of a respected, upper middle-class identity (Cohen 2004). For the nation, the university became a symbol of scientific knowledge and national development. Writing in 1966, Bashshur explains that after Syria's independence in 1946 the prestige of the Syrian University [Damascus University] grew tremendously: 'It became a symbol of national pride, and was designated as the fountainhead of national guidance' (Bashshur 1966, 456). Today, public universities still have a special significance in contemporary Arab societies, as symbols of national development and equality of opportunity, as Mazawi (2005, 60) explains:

The 'great universities' – Cairo, Alexandria, Ain Shams – symbolize the age of liberalism as well as liberation from colonial rule. They are considered by many to be truly 'national' institutions. They are also concrete reminders of the Nasser period, during which new classes began to benefit, in ever increasing numbers, from higher education.

In the 1980s, however, Arab middle-income nations experienced deep fiscal crises, and transitioned away from the model of state-led development. Many Arab nations implemented Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programs (ERSAP), which required greater openness to foreign investment, a reduction of state spending, 'and the privatization of wide sectors of the economy, including in the field of higher education' (Mazawi 2005, 161). Scholars have argued that the implementation of neo-liberal state policies in the MENA region has left young people less secure in crucial domains of social life, including education, employment and marriage (Dhillon and Yousef 2009). Cohen (2004) argues that a series of neo-liberal economic reforms initiated in the early 1980s in Morocco 'significantly eroded the capacity of the state to nurture the middle class', making the trajectory of education to public-sector employment obsolete. Indeed, Dhillon and Yousef (2007) calculate that unemployment in the MENA region is the highest in the world at 25%, compared to the worldwide average of 14%<sup>1</sup> (Dhillon and Yousef 2007). Additionally, in many MENA nations, unemployment rates for university graduates are actually higher than for those without a degree; for example, the World Bank (2011) reports that 'in Tunisia and Egypt unemployment rates are highest among highly educated individuals, 17% in Egypt and 21% in Tunisia' (World Bank 2011, 1).<sup>2</sup>

In the years before the Arab Spring of 2011 erupted, many policy analysts expressed concern over the inability of Arab states to incorporate their youth into socio-economic life,<sup>3</sup> as the region's many disaffected unemployed youth seemed ripe for mobilisation or radicalisation (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi 2007; Dhillon and Yousef 2009; Yusuf 2008). Higher education quality is a prominent source of criticism in this literature, as expansion and privatisation are thought to have reduced the quality of Arab universities (Mazawi 2005; Romani 2009; Rugh 2002). Much research has argued that the low quality of higher education in the region is insufficiently preparing youth for the labour market and thereby contributing to high rates of unemployment in the region, which is in turn framed as a major cause of political protest and instability (Chaaban 2008; Kabbani and Kamel 2009; Salehi-Isfahani and Dhillon 2008; World Bank 2008).

Concerns over youth exclusion seem to have come to fruition in the Arab Spring, the term coined to describe the various people-led demonstrations and revolutions in the Arab World. Protests started in December 2010 in Tunisia, as protestors took to the streets in an outcry over social and economic conditions and regime corruption. Similar peaceful protests then spread to Egypt against the Mubarak regime in early 2011 and, from Egypt, more violent revolutions spread to Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria (Anderson 2011). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the overwhelming

majority of participants in many Arab nations, including Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Yemen, have been unemployed young people, discontent with their general lack of opportunity for political and economic participation (Al-Momani 2011; Anderson 2011). In fact, some have argued that the Arab Spring was not just a rejection of Arab leaders themselves, but rather, of the entire system of state-led development. For example, Abdelwahab Alkebsi, the former director of the Middle East division at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has explained that: ‘The recent uprisings were not just a rejection of leaders. They were a rejection of an archaic and dysfunctional social contract that left citizens dependent on their states’ (Buckner, Beges, and Khatib 2012).<sup>4</sup> If so, further investigation of youth attitudes towards state-led development is warranted.

Unfortunately, very little research probes beyond stereotypes of anxious unemployed youth to reveal the nuances of how young people view their own opportunities in higher education and the labour market. In fact, despite some critical analyses (see Hendrixson 2003), the majority of the youth exclusion literature is framed in terms of national security or regional stability, and nearly all of it emerges from a demographic or human capital framework that emphasises the dire consequences of a youth bulge and high youth unemployment (Chaaban 2009; Chakir 2008; Fuller 2003; Hendrixson 2003; Street, Kabbani, and Al Oraibi 2006). Given the strong links between higher education, the state and individuals’ perceived social status, higher education reform in the Arab World has implications beyond simply understanding young people’s employment prospects. Higher education reform is fruitful ground to explore young people’s expectations about their own future lives, and their perceptions of the state’s capacity to foster opportunities.

Additionally, most literature on youth exclusion is based exclusively on data from national statistics – very little research has actually asked young people in the MENA region about how they perceive their opportunities, or their states’ policies. Although Dhillon and Yousef (2009), editors of the flagship book on youth exclusion in the region, *Generation in Waiting*, write that they hope their volume ‘will be viewed not within the narrow context of demography or security but rather within a larger agenda of inclusive development in the Middle East’ (2), the book’s chapters are socio-economic profiles of youth based exclusively on national economic and demographic statistics. Nation-level statistics cannot shed insight into individuals’ sources of frustrations; a recent report by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center has argued that the field’s ‘silo-like’ focus on national economic indicators made it impossible to predict the eruption of the Arab Spring in Tunisia (Abu Dhabi Gallup Center 2011).

The present study provides an initial investigation into broader questions of youth perceptions of opportunity in the Arab world in the years immediately prior to the Arab Spring, offering a nuanced picture of young Syrians’ perceptions of higher education policies, specifically as they relate to access to higher education and labour market opportunities after the 2001 higher education reforms.

Considering its highly repressive political environment, conducting qualitative research within Syria is difficult, especially when issues may be politically sensitive. Data are limited to a snowball sample of 22 interviews, conducted with a diverse swath of Syrian youth in Damascus in 2009. Although not a numerically large cohort, these interviews provide a nuanced picture of youth perceptions of higher education reforms during Syria’s transitional period. By using a grounded theory approach, the study set out to attempt to theorise the relationship between demographic attributes, educational experiences and youth perceptions of opportunity during Syria’s period of

economic transition prior to the Arab Spring. The circumstances of the Syrian youth interviewed in 2009 parallel those faced by many young people throughout the Arab world, where most nations are rapidly expanding access to higher education and pursuing privatisation reforms. As such, this study provides insight into the role of the higher education system in fostering youth discontent in the region, and deepens our understanding of perceptions of opportunity (or the lack thereof) in the contemporary Arab world. Unpacking the many factors that shape the larger socio-political context contributes to an understanding of the myriad factors that made the Arab Spring revolutions both possible and probable.

### **The case of Syria**

This paper focuses on Syria in the decade after 2000, as this decade of Syria's history exemplifies the struggle that many Arab nations face in determining how to educate and employ large youth populations while transitioning to a neo-liberal model. Syria has a long history with state-socialism, which began when the Arab Socialist Baath Party officially took power in 1963 and has remained the official rhetoric since the Assad regime took over in 1966. However, in the 1990s, Syria initiated a transition to a market-based economy, which it termed a 'social market economy'. In 2000, Syria signed an Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), which involved the liberalization of trade with the EU over a period of 12 years. In 2001, Syria presented an application for membership to the World Trade Organization (WTO), and was officially granted observer status in May 2010. In addition, Syria was a signatory to the 1998 Greater Arab Free Trade Association (GAFTA), which went into full effect in 2005; the GAFTA eliminated all tariffs and custom duties between 17 Arab countries party to the agreement. The agreement aimed to liberalise trade among Arab nations and promote the export of Syrian goods (Abedini and Peridy 2008).

Between 2000 and 2009, Syria made slow progress towards building infrastructure for market liberalisation. Banking laws were reformed in 2001, and private banks first opened in 2004. In 2003, Syria reduced corporate taxes from 65% to 35%, to encourage private investment (Kabbani and Kamel 2009) and, in 2006, the number of steps and days required to start a business were significantly reduced (Kabbani and Kamel 2009). Then, in 2008, this so-called socialist nation officially opened a stock market (Sottimano and Selvik 2008). In short, in the year 2009, Syria seemed to be a country that was changing rapidly, and there was some cause for optimism; Syria was experiencing a 4–5% growth in GDP (Hinnebush 2012).

Since late 2010, Syria has devolved into an entrenched conflict, revealing the deep sectarian divides in the country, and distinguishing the Syrian uprising from the relatively more peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt (Hinnebush 2012). Prior to the Arab Spring, however, Syria presented itself to the world as just one of many Arab states transitioning from an older model of state-led development to a neo-liberal state, making it a useful case for examining the links between higher education reform and youth understandings of opportunity (Guazzone and Pioppi 2009). Moreover, in light of recent developments in Syria, which include continued anti-government protests, the formation of a popular armed militia (i.e. the Free Syrian Army) and increasingly brutal government crackdowns on protesters in cities such as Daraa, Homs and Houla, understanding young people's views of their educational and employment opportunities in Syria can shed light on the sources of discontent that churned behind the façade of a reforming nation.

### Higher education in Syria: a system in transition

For four decades after independence, university admissions in Syria were strictly limited to a small percentage of the population, based on strict exit exams adopted from French and Egyptian models. To this day, the pathway to higher education remains largely unchanged; the Ministry of Education administers exit exams at the end of basic education (9th grade) tracking youth into one of three secondary schooling tracks: (a) the general (i.e. academic) secondary education, which can lead to university; (b) technical secondary education for technical careers such as medicine; and (c) vocational secondary education (Kabbani and Kamel 2009). There are no options for re-entering the general secondary system once tracked into vocational education, and it is extremely rare for youth in the vocational track to gain admittance to university (Al-Heeti and Beck 1997; Kabbani and Kamel 2009; World Bank 2008).

At the end of secondary school, young people then sit for an exit exam known as the Baccalaureate. Based on their score, students are given a small number of options for universities and majors. Those who do not score high enough to attend a university are tracked into two-year intermediate institutes that provide training in an applied field such as informatics or bookkeeping.

Until 2000, Syria also strictly limited the establishment of universities. At its independence, Syria had only one university – the Syrian University<sup>5</sup> – operating just two faculties – medicine and law. After independence, four additional faculties were added: engineering, sciences, arts and letters, and education, and in 1958, a second university, The University of Aleppo, was established. Two additional universities were founded in the 1970s, such that by the 1980s, roughly 15% of all university-age Syrians were enrolled in university. Between 1980 and 2000, however, Syria all but stopped expanding higher education, giving it one of the lowest growth rates in higher education in the world (World Bank 2008, 169) (Table 1).

As part of its larger economic transition, Syria implemented a number of educational reforms in 2001. The Ministry opened a new public university, Al-Furat, in 2006 and initiated cost-sharing programmes such as Open Learning, which allows students who were previously not permitted to enrol in four-year university classes due to their low grades to register for newly created applied programmes such as Media Studies, Translation, Computer Science and Insurance, which held classes on weekends and charged approximately 600 USD a year. The number of full-time university students more than doubled between 1997 and 2007, driven by increases in public university enrolments and Open Learning (see Table 2). In the 2009–2010 academic year, 147,575 students were enrolled in 15 Open Learning programmes, accounting for roughly one third of all university students (CBS 2004–2009). Similar expansion

Table 1. Universities in Syria, founding dates and faculties (2009).

University	City	Founding date	Total faculties
Damascus University	Damascus	1923	24
University of Aleppo	Aleppo	1958	23
Tishreen University	Latakia	1971	21
Al-Baath University	Homs and Hama	1979	23
Al-Furat University	Deir-Ezzor	2006	18

occurred at the graduate level, with the number of Master's students growing from 1828 in 2004 to 8663 in 2008 (CBS 2009).

Additionally, Syria passed a groundbreaking law that permitted the creation of private universities. As of 2010, 15 private for-profit higher education institutions were operating in Syria, many of which cost upwards of 10,000 USD/year. In 2009, private universities enrolled 24,573 students a year, constituting roughly 4% of all university students (Buckner and Saba 2010; CBS 2004–2009) (Table 2).

Despite overall growth, access to higher education in Syria varies substantially by family background. Women make up slightly more than half of all university enrolments (50.5% men to 49.5% women) and actually graduate from higher education at higher rates than men (Buckner and Saba 2010). However, enrolment rates vary by region and class. Roughly 26% of urban youth are in university, compared to only 17% of rural youth. Gender differences are also more pronounced in rural areas; in urban areas, gender parity exists, with 26% of both genders enrolled, while in rural areas, 18% of males are at university compared to only 15% of females (Kabbani and Salloum 2011). University enrolment rates also differ by class background; approximately 30% of youth from the top quintile are enrolled in university, while less than 15% of youth from the lowest two quintiles are (Kabbani and Salloum 2011). In general, the Syrian university system tends to enrol more urban students, and those from wealthier backgrounds because, despite equalising rhetoric, urban and wealthy youth have access to better primary and secondary schooling, advantaging them on the Baccalaureate.

There is reason to suspect that the expansion of higher education after 2001 may actually have exacerbated existing inequalities. Substantial cross-national research in the sociology of education suggests that the initial expansion of educational systems can actually increase stratification, at least initially, if the demand for university positions is not yet saturated, as upper-class families use their substantial material and cultural capital to secure places in university for their children (Park 2004; Shavit and Westerbeek 1998; Shavit et al. 2007; Torche 2002). Moreover, many of the reforms

Table 2. Higher education enrollments by institution type (2009–2010).

Public universities	Government sponsored	Fee-paying students (Parallel Learning)	Open Learning	Total university
Damascus	101,024	17,695	64,187	182,906
Aleppo	80,651	13,144	36,994	130,789
Teshreen	47,930	8165	14,433	70,528
Al-Baath	36,402	7409	24,589	68,400
Al-Furat	22,340	3907	7372	33,619
Sub-total	288,347	50,320	147,575	486,242
Other post-secondary institutions				
High and intermediate institutes (vocational 2-year and arts institutes)				89,024
Ministries' training centers				60,688
Private universities				24,573
The Syrian Virtual University				8103
Sub-total				182,388
Total post-secondary				668,630

to higher education in Syria instituted fees, suggesting a growing importance of family wealth in determining access. To implement the 2001 higher education reforms, the Syrian government substantially increased investment in basic education and higher education, bringing its spending in line with other nations. By 2005, spending on higher education amounted to roughly 3.5% of public spending and 1% of GDP (Kabbani and Salloum 2011). The 2001 reforms, however, also led to greater reliance on private contributions for higher education. User fees increased; while the total annual fees required for undergraduates in public universities amounted to about 30 USD, they exceeded 1000 USD in Open Learning and 2000 USD for Parallel Learning students. Average annual tuition at private universities was 5000 USD (TEMPUS 2010). In 2009, students in Open Learning, Parallel Learning, the Virtual University and the various private universities accounted for 43.9% of all students in university; while these new students may not pay the entire cost of their education, they are paying substantially more than their government-funded counterparts for either the same education (in Parallel Learning), or for what is widely considered to be a worse education (in Open Learning). Meanwhile, no forms of financial aid are offered to offset expenses at private universities or cost-sharing programmes.

There is also reason to believe that the expansion of higher education will have important effects on youth experiences in the labour market. Although higher education reforms were rhetorically linked to the building of a knowledge economy, it is not likely that the 2001 higher education reforms will actually improve young people's labour market opportunities, as the vast majority of the growth in enrolments has come from Open Learning. While Open Learning allows youth to obtain a four-year degree, their classes meet only on weekends, and are not considered to be on a par with other four-year Bachelor's degree programmes.

Additionally, the expansion of higher education has occurred simultaneously with the dismantling of former employment protections, making university graduates' economic position more precarious. Syrian government employees make up roughly 23% of the labour force; however, in 2001, the Syrian government ended its policy of ensuring employment of graduates of post-secondary intermediate institutes (two-year post-secondary vocational institutes), which had previously been the main path to careers in state-owned enterprises (Kabbani and Kothari 2005). This change was in line with Syria's larger transition to a market economy and an associated concern to slim down the public sector. The decoupling of the public university system from public-sector employment means that higher education no longer promises the security it once did, particularly for young people tracked into two-year post-secondary programmes. In fact, while Syria used to guarantee public-sector employment to all graduates of both two- and four-year institutions until as late as 2000, as of 2007, unemployment among 15–29 year olds stood at 27% for four-year university graduates and 41% for graduates of two-year vocational institutes (CBS 2004–2009).

However, gender is an important mediating factor in determining the link between education and employment. Syria has a very low rate of female labour force participation; only 15.1% of the entire labour force is female (Kabbani and Kamel 2009). Despite overall low labour participation rates, attending higher education facilitates females' entry into the labour market significantly. Young people with secondary, two-year post-secondary and university education all experienced unemployment rates at or above 25%; however, females with higher education experienced the lowest rates of unemployment, while males with primary schooling were those with the lowest rates of unemployment. This contrast is most likely because, although

Table 3. Unemployment rate by gender and education for youth 15–29 in 2006/2007.

Education level	Total (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)
Primary	13	32	10
Preparatory	20	59	14
Secondary	33	62	20
Intermediate institute (2-year vocational schools)	41	51	29
University	27	30	24
Total	18	42	12

Source: Kabbani and Salloum 2011.

Syria actual advocates the rights of women's access to education in its constitution,<sup>6</sup> women are not considered primary breadwinners in their families and cultural norms discourage all but professional employment for women. This means that Syrian females do not enter the labour force unless they can obtain a professional job (Kabbani 2009). In contrast, because of pressure to earn a salary to provide for their families, many males must accept any available job. As a result, Syria has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of working females with university credentials. Between 2001 and 2007, the percentage of employed females with a post-secondary degree rose from 24% to 47%, while it increased only slightly for males, from 11% to 13% (Kabbani 2009). Table 3 shows unemployment rates by education level and gender.

Given the long-standing connection between the state, labour market and university, the investigation was concerned with how young people view the relationship between these three social institutions, and whether these views differ by gender.

### Theoretical framework

Most literature on youth and higher education in MENA draws on a human capital framework, a core idea in economic theory, which argues that students gain knowledge and skills through formal education that make them more productive employees in the labour force (Schultz 1959). According to human capital theory, the poor quality education that young Syrians receive in higher education does not actually increase their productivity, or lead to a mismatch between the needs of the economy and students' skills, causing low levels of productivity. However, the narrow lens of human capital theory does not shed light onto how higher education shapes young people's perceptions of their opportunities, or their state. Consequently, this article draws on diverse streams of sociological theory to connect youth perceptions of higher education to those of the larger state.

Sociologists have long argued that higher education both confers elite status, while also defining status inequalities. Meyer (1977) explains that: 'Modern educational systems involve large-scale public classification systems, defining new roles and statuses for both elites and members' (56). According to this perspective, educational institutions charter different life paths, quite apart from what skills or knowledge young people actually learn in school. More recently, Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum (2008), have argued that, due in part to its unique ability to charter life paths in modern societies, higher education should be viewed as a hub that connects diverse

streams of social life. The authors state that universities ‘are central to the infrastructure of modernity, connecting modern societies’ major institutions even while they remain officially independent and intermittently critical of them’ (142). This investigation extends this argument by assuming that in Syria, not only do universities connect individuals, families, the labour market, elite positions and the state and its bureaucracy – but that as a result of this interconnectedness, young people perceive their experiences in higher education as a reflection of the capacities of the universities and the institutions that charter them, including the state itself. The rest of this article explores young people’s perceptions of higher education and implications for their larger perceptions of their state; the next section details the data collection process and interview findings.

### Data and methodology

Data for this study come from 22 two-hour semi-structured interviews with a diverse set of Damascene Syrians, age 18–31 over two months in 2009, and follow up interviews with six of the interviewees in 2010.<sup>7</sup> Given the nuanced and complicated notion of opportunity, interviews were the most feasible research method for gaining extended insights into young people’s lives and their perceptions of opportunity. The interviews were conducted in Syrian Arabic and/or English, as requested by the interviewee. The interviews were open-ended, but generally covered students’ experiences in middle and high school, future education and employment aspirations, choice of university degree, and current and past work experiences.<sup>8</sup>

Snowball sampling was used with multiple points of origin, garnered through a youth-oriented Syrian NGO to ensure that interviewees came from a diverse range of educational and family backgrounds. In total, the sample included eight females, whose ages ranged from 18 to 31, and 14 males, whose ages ranged from 18 to 27. The interviewees represented a wide diversity of backgrounds (e.g. single, married, divorced, Christians, Muslims, rural, urban, Syrian and Palestinian).<sup>9</sup>

The interviewees had a wide range of educational experiences. Three of the interviewees had a middle school education, while four had dropped out of middle or high school but passed the Baccalaureate without attending school. Eleven interviewees were currently in college, one had dropped out of college and seven had graduated college. Of those, three were in the process of applying for Master’s degrees. Five had attended private secondary schooling. In the sample, 15 students were in four-year universities and four were in two-year intermediate institutes, while one attended a private university. Students pursued a diverse range of university majors, including: Applied Arts, Business/Accounting, Economics, Engineering, English, French, Law, Medicine and Translation. Twelve were currently working either full- or part-time, and their experiences included jobs such as: artisan in a handcraft shop, barber, cashier, freelance writer, professional researcher in a non-profit, dentist, private English tutor and governmental employee.

The findings in this study are limited in generalisability due to its small sample and snowball sampling. However, the primary goal of the qualitative interviews was not representativeness, but saturation, i.e. the consistent repetition of patterns across interviewees and sub-groups. The reported results represent common themes that emerged across all youth, and within sub-groups.

The distinct political climate in Syria, in which citizens are generally suspicious of the secret police and fearful of voicing any complaints openly, made it impossible to

tape record conversations.<sup>10</sup> Instead, thorough notes were taken during interviews, and in some cases, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify inconsistencies. In general, interviewees were quite open to discussing their lives, experiences and problems with me. To overcome these potential limitations and to compliment the interview research, additional non-participant observations were conducted over two months in the summer of 2009 in two contexts: firstly, as an intern at a youth-oriented non-profit organisation, and secondly, living with a working-class family with two young people in the appropriate age range. In both contexts, informal informational interviews were conducted to understand the context of youth's lives. Although regional differences in Syria are significant determinants of educational and labour market options, and would have provided an important line of inquiry, this study is limited to youth who resided in Damascus in 2009, although many grew up in other regions.

Coding procedures followed Charmaz's (2001) advice for a grounded theory approach, which is widely utilised in qualitative methodology, used to synthesise understandings about individuals' perceptions and lived experiences.<sup>11</sup> Charmaz advocates an initial line-by-line approach to coding, which allows for researchers to build their analysis from the data without permitting their own biases to shape their analysis. Following this approach, each interview was read in its entirety, and then each phrase of the interview was labelled with a brief code that captured or summarised the interviewee's main points. After initial line-by-line codes were developed, interviews were re-coded using 'focused coding' which Charmaz defines as a process in which codes that reappear consistently in line-by-line coding are used to sift through large amounts of data. Codes were then synthesised into categories, which are essentially certain codes that have 'overriding significance' in explicating the data (345). A sample of this coding technique is provided in Table 4 below.

### **Findings: access and opportunity**

This section describes Syrian young people's perceptions of recent reforms to higher education and the labour market, and how their demographic characteristics shape their perceptions of the 2001 higher education reforms. The major finding is that young people were critical of the higher education system broadly, and that their

Table 4. Examples of interview coding.

Example quote 1	Line-by-line codes
'I just finished middle school, not high school. In middle school, my average was low so I could only go into a vocational track in high school, studying either business/accounting or sewing/tailoring, and I didn't want to do that and they wouldn't have provided a good life, so I just left school. But I would have liked to study literature.'	Leaving school before graduating high school Low exam grades Tracking; restricted options for future study Unmet educational aspiration Focused code Unmet educational aspiration Strict school admissions policies Category Thwarted educational aspiration

discontent stemmed from two sources: (1) the failure of the prior model of manpower planning, which leaves youth insecure in the labour market, but still subject to substantial state intervention; and (2) a perceived lack of meritocracy in the sorting process, which benefits the wealthy and well connected, and which has been exacerbated by the 2001 reforms. Nonetheless, youth perceptions varied: family wealth allowed youth to bypass barriers to access, making them more content with their options, while gender played an important role in shaping perceptions of labour market security. Young people's particular sources of discontent suggest a targeted rejection of the Syrian state's involvement in students' educational careers, and a broader rejection of the idea of state-led development.

### ***Thwarted ambitions: failed manpower planning***

A primary justification for the state's role in sorting students and tracking them into educational and career paths was manpower planning – the idea that the government could align its higher education system to the needs of the economy. Although its promise of employment has long-since evaporated, the state is still an active sorter of youth. A major finding from the interviews is that the state's inability to maintain labour market security, while still playing an active role in sorting youth into majors and careers, is perceived by youth as a failure of manpower planning. This failure contributes to a delegitimisation of the larger notion of state-led development, as youth feel subject to extensive state intervention, without enjoying the promised benefits.

Youth perceptions of the failure of manpower planning involve two sources of discontent: (a) active state intervention in students' lives, which gives youth little choice over their futures and prevents them from pursuing personal interests; and (b) labour market insecurity. Importantly, youth perceive these two phenomena as highly inter-related – youth externalise their difficulty finding employment as being due to the state's failed manpower planning process and centralised sorting, which does not allow them to choose education concentrations or career paths.

The most common refrain in all interviews was that students simply could not pursue their programme of choice and that their options were limited. Many youth stated that 'they had no choice' over what they studied. One young man, Nader, who had wanted to study Accounting, but did not have high enough grades, exclaimed: 'There is no taking into consideration what students desire here. Grades alone are what allow you to do what you do'. Other interviewees called choice a 'luxury' or explained that they 'had no future' because they were unable to study their desired major. The experience of having a thwarted educational ambition crossed lines of gender, class and educational attainment appearing in nearly all interviews, suggesting it is a widespread experience for Syrian youth.

It is clear that while expanding access generally, the Syrian state has not truly opened up channels for youth to pursue their own ambitions in the higher education system. The interviews suggest that barriers to accessing a desired university programme are the greatest source of frustration for young people across all demographic groups. However, it is important to note that many young people did have choices – those who performed well on the Baccalaureate exam could study almost any subject they desired. Thus, in stating that the admissions system leaves them no choice, youth were actually stating that they were unhappy with the choices they were offered, and were hence critical of the larger system that limited their choices.

Importantly, youth interviewed perceive a lack of choice in university to be a contributing factor to labour market insecurity. Many young people claimed that because of centralised university admissions processes, students are sorted into careers for which they have no interest or aptitude. When discussing their inability to find employment, many respondents' first, and most passionate response, was that their failure stemmed from the fact that they were not able to pursue their own passions. For example, Hassan, a 21-year-old male studying English Translation at Open Learning, while also working full-time at an international company, explained:

The problem is that they don't put the right person in the right place. If they gave me opportunity to be a computer programmer, I would be a good programmer because I love it. This is the problem, they put the wrong person in the wrong place.

Hassan's comment is illuminating because he is clearly blaming an external sorter ('they'); he is not pointing out that his grades did not qualify him for his top-choice career. This externalisation of blame was found in nearly all interviews, and indicates frustration with the educational system, rather than one's own performance. It can be seen that the state-maintained control over sorting students into educational majors, which leaves youth insecure in the labour market, is perceived by youth as the state's inability to fulfil its obligations. It seems that young people's real frustration is not simply that they cannot find a job (any job), but that they are structurally prevented from pursuing an educational path that would lead to a personally meaningful job. In this sense, it is not simply unemployment or economic insecurity that frustrates youth; rather, it is the lack of a fulfilling life path and a lack of choice over their futures. These findings may have important implications for scholars of the Arab world in other nations as well – it is an important empirical question as to whether youth in other Arab nations have the same sentiments.

### *The breadwinners' burden*

Despite common frustrations over state sorting, the data suggest that males were more singularly concerned about the link between education and employment than females. Young men across the dataset who attended some form of higher education seemed to not only want the credential, but also the promise of labour market security that such a diploma traditionally offered, while women respondents valued a wider range of purposes for higher education. In my dataset, both of the young men attending an Open Learning programme called it a moneymaking scheme for the government, arguing that it swindled them out of money, while not offering the desired (historically promised) level of job security. For example, a male graduate of the Open Learning programme argued that, 'Open Learning was just about making money ... it was a financial project'. Another respondent, a 21-year-old male student majoring in English through the Open Learning programme, insisted that the government should cancel the entire Open Learning programme due to its effects on the labour market. He explained: 'They have to cancel Open Learning, because in the end, the government doesn't accept the Open Learning degree, so why do they give it? The government only created it to get money'. The young man implies that the purpose of the Open Learning programmes is not really to expand access to higher education, but rather for the state to make money from citizens' high demand for higher education.

In contrast, females saw the expansion of educational opportunities as inherently good, and tended to mention diverse reasons for why education was important, such

as, university served as a source of national development, helped them garner social respect or was commanded by their religion. Their justifications were somewhat vague, however, as many simply stated that higher education was ‘important for life’ and helped one earn ‘social respect’. One young woman, a graduate of both a two-year vocational programme, who returned to university through the Open Learning programme to pursue a four-year degree, explained that, ‘Open Learning is a valuable program for those who did not have opportunities to study at first’. In general, women did not call for the closing of Open Learning programmes, but rather praised them for expanding access to study. These gendered responses to higher education reflect the different role higher education plays in men’s and women’s lives, and the differential impact it has on men’s and women’s access to the labour market. In light of statistics which show that higher education is a much more powerful mechanism for female entry to the labour market, it makes sense that females are happy to get a four-year degree, as it gives them more labour market options. Moreover, because their roles in Syrian society do not emphasise employment, they are able to see a wide range of benefits inherent in higher education. In contrast, we might hypothesise that the increased labour market insecurity males feel as a result of the new reforms is perceived as a direct threat to their ability to fulfil their social obligations, making them even more critical.

### *The myth of meritocracy*

Youth expressed a widespread perception of injustice at the hands of the higher education system, primarily due to unequal opportunities in the admissions process. In understanding Syrian students’ sense of injustice, it is important to recognise that a major justification for the state’s involvement in sorting students into educational trajectories is the idea of meritocracy. In rhetoric, the Baccalaureate claims to be an exam that rewards hard work more than family class background or connections, and students clearly internalised this message – they consistently emphasised that individual effort and ‘studying hard’ was the key to success on the Baccalaureate. However, in order for the Baccalaureate to be considered fair, respondents believed that its impossibly high standards must be applied to all. Interviews revealed a deep sense of injustice at the fact that the Baccalaureate was not the only factor in determining access to university. Two factors emerged as major sources of discontent: (a) the growing influence of wealth after the 2001 reforms introduced private universities and parallel programmes; and (b) widespread corruption in the admissions system that privileges those with family connections. It is apparent that young people’s perceived injustice leads them to reject the state’s role in sorting youth into educational paths, and contributes to a larger sense that the state lacks the capacity to implement fair policies.

First, the privatisation of higher education has meant an increasing role for family wealth in helping certain young people obtain advantages under the new higher education reforms. Individuals from wealthier backgrounds are able to pay expensive tuitions at private universities to study a desired subject when denied access to the equivalent programme at a public university. The wealthy can also pay for private tutors in difficult subjects in university, and so, are also more likely to be accepted to graduate programmes. Many interviewees expressed the view that the role of family wealth in determining access to university was unfair, given the official policy of meritocracy. One young man, Reda, who worked full-time in a small clothing manufacturing factory to support his family, explained the difficulty those from his background face in pursuing advanced degrees: ‘You need a Master’s or a Doctorate to make money, but you need money to get

a Master's or Doctorate'. Another young woman shared his sentiment, stating that, 'money makes educated people, not the other way around'.

The 2001 reforms, which expanded options for studying in the private sector, were viewed as exacerbating the role of wealth in determining university options, and particularly in helping certain youth access high-paying, high-prestige career paths (e.g. medicine and dentistry). For example, although admission to a medical school at the public university requires extremely high marks on the exit exam (Ministry of Higher Education 2010), the new reforms allow academically weaker students to acquire the high status of a medical degree by paying to attend a private medical school. Those in the public system resented this alternative pathway to elite status. Ahmed, a very high-achieving young man enrolled as a medical student at a public university, complained about the flood of new doctors into the profession and the reduced status his degree now brings. He stated that:

The biggest problem in Syria from the perspective of human medicine is the private universities. Private universities require lower grades and still graduate doctors. Medicine takes skills, intelligence, abilities that aren't found in all students. Some students have a little, or a lot, of money and at a private university, that makes them a doctor.

Ahmed's concern is not simply about the labour market competition, but also about the status of doctors. Social status used to be doled out by performance on academic exams alone, but for many youth, it appears to be for sale to those whose academic achievement is not as high. As an individual who benefited from the former organisation of status allocation, this young man resented the new system, which allowed for students from particular backgrounds to alter the rules of play.

Second, youth from poor family backgrounds also expressed a sense of injustice resulting from the role that political and family connections had in helping students obtain access to university. As one interviewee remarked:

Imagine – a poor kid has to study forever to get really high grades just to get into a public school. He needs impossibly high marks. But a rich kid has two ways of succeeding. Either he can go to a private university or could find a way into a public university through his family's connections.

The importance of having family connections was also seen as giving certain youth advantages in the labour market.

People who go to university, but don't have connections – 'Vitamin C' as we call it – can't get a government position. Or else, they have to pay to get a job. Sometimes they have to pay 50,000 or 100,000 lira just to get a job.<sup>12</sup>

While Syria's new reforms are expanding opportunities to study, it is clear that they are not necessarily decreasing the importance of wealth or connections in education or in accessing public-sector employment. Young people's sense of injustice undermines the state's rationale for sorting youth – essentially, many Syrian youth feel that they are not only sorted into majors and careers that they are not interested in, but that the sorting process itself is biased towards those who have money and connections. As Syria's nationally standardised exit exams were premised on eliminating the elitist policies of the colonial era, the perceived role of wealth and connections undermines the state's claim of meritocracy and suggests that youth do not believe the state is a fair arbiter of future opportunity.

## Discussion and analysis

The interviews suggest that young people are generally quite dissatisfied with Syrian higher education; however, unlike human capital theory might predict, the overwhelming sources of discontent are not simply low quality teaching or large class sizes (although these are certainly mentioned). Instead, substantial state intervention in determining young people's educational options and the ability of family connections and wealth to evade official sorting policies are two major sources of discontent. This suggests that youth dissatisfaction with both higher education and the state more broadly cannot be narrowly conceived as simply discontent with the availability of employment after graduation. While high unemployment is certainly a major source of frustration, the entire experience of higher education is also perceived as arbitrary and unfair to many youths.

Based on the descriptive findings, it is possible to generalise about sources of youth discontent across different demographic groups. This indicates that young men who have performed well in school expect to benefit from substantial economic returns and social prestige in the form of secure jobs in medicine or other elite fields. Their concerns with the reforms centre around the loss of prestige and reduction in economic security that accompany the introduction of new pathways to elite jobs, namely the introduction of private schools. In contrast, females who have performed well in school are less concerned about the need for employment. Rather, they are quite content with their educational and employment opportunities and, in general, advocate the many virtues of education and the importance of hard work in achieving one's ambitions. Most are content with expanded opportunities for higher education.

Among students with middling or low academic achievement, we again see gendered differences. Lower-income men who have gone on to higher education, but not achieved high marks, are those who are most discontent with the current reforms. This is because these young men are tracked into programmes that are often unrelated to their interests, and do not promise the economic pay-off these young men expect. They do not have family connections or wealth to help them secure a better future, yet, they still experience societal pressure to find gainful employment and provide for their families, without a clear path of how to do so. In contrast, young females who have low levels of academic achievement expressed gratefulness at the opportunity to study in university, as it improved both their standing in society and their opportunities for future marriage and employment. Low achieving young women, while having high aspirations, also had the option and expectation of marriage and childrearing, with less of a social burden to provide for their family.

Prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring, many argued that young, unemployed men were like a tinderbox in the Middle East (Fuller 2003; Hvistendahl 2011). Yet, this study suggests that it is specifically the educated unemployed who are most discontent, and it is not simply because they are unemployed, but rather because they feel wronged. Indeed, we could imagine a world in which unemployed men believe that they have failed somehow and are apathetic and ashamed to publicise their discontent; instead, in Syria, and the broader Middle East, is it possible that educated unemployed young men believe that the entire higher education system, and the state in charge of it, has failed them? Young men are subject to significant state intervention in their future lives, which they accept based on the premise of secure future employment. It is when they cannot find employment that they are most vocally discontent. Generally, those who have wealth or family connections are much less likely to externalise

blame because they can evade state intervention over their lives. It is those who do not have family connections or wealth who feel most subject to the state's policies, and are most likely to externalise their failures to those of the entire system.

## Conclusions

Many scholars of the Middle East are concerned about the 'problem of Middle Eastern youth', and research has focused on the role of state policies in incorporating the poor, disaffected and unemployed in the region (Dhillon and Salehi-Isfahani 2009; The World Bank 2007). Syria offers an interesting case study of the extent to which Arab states have been successful at meeting the demands of their youth, as its 2001 higher education policies reveal substantial effort on the part of the national government to expand educational opportunities to youth who were historically excluded from higher education. Data indicate that young people's expectations reflect a particular understanding of the role of the state in its citizens' lives, one aligned with a long-standing belief in the idea of state-led development. As such, young Syrians' discontent over their educational and employment opportunities also reflects their beliefs about the larger opportunity structure and the Syrian state itself.

The Syrian higher education system has historically played an important role in a larger social contract of state-led development. In this contract, established in the post-colonial era, the state symbolically promised a direct and secure pathway from education to employment for the individual and collective good, in return for curtailed civil liberties and political freedoms. Higher education was organised as a social and political institution to sort individuals into different life paths – limited to a select few and dominated by the elites. However, the recent expansion of access to higher education has meant that a university degree no longer leads to secure employment, and yet no additional political freedoms have been guaranteed. Moreover, even the promise of meritocracy in admissions policies has been undermined by the introduction of private universities and fee-charging programmes. In this way, the failure of the Syrian government to make good on its promises of relevant education and secure employment has been experienced by youth as a disappointment and disenchantment with the state. It has led to a de-legitimatisation of the ideology of state-led development, as well as the political leaders in charge. Because young people have come to expect certain privileges and a certain level of economic security from their state, in return for limited political freedoms, their thwarted ambitions and unmet expectations in the education and labour market have resulted in substantial frustration and anger, directed towards the state.

## Notes

1. Unemployment refers to the share of the labour force that is without work but available for and seeking employment.
2. Macro-regional and comparative data come from the World Development Indicators. National labour statistics are typically collected through labour surveys, carried out by national Ministries of Labor.
3. A prominent source of research on youth exclusion in the Arab world is the Middle East Youth Initiative (MEYI), which was founded in 2006 and housed at the Brookings Institute. For more in-depth research on country-specific dynamics, and discussion of youth exclusion in housing, marriage and employment, see MEYI's website at: <http://www.shababinclusion.com>.

4. These comments were made on the record in email correspondence with Ms. Sarina Beges, who runs the Project on Social Entrepreneurship at the same FSI Center. Mr. Alkebsi's views on the significance of the Arab Spring were sought for a paper on social entrepreneurship in the region (see Buckner, Beges, and Khatib 2012).
5. Today, known as Damascus University; its name was changed in 1958, upon the founding of the University of Aleppo.
6. Article 45 of the Syrian constitution stipulates that, 'The State guarantees women all opportunities enabling them to fully and effectively participate in the political, social, cultural, and economic life. The State shall remove all restrictions that prevent women's development and participation in building the socialist Arab society' (European University Institute, April 2009, 45).
7. All interview questions were approved by the PI's IRB prior to data collection and interviews were conducted in line with the IRB protocol.
8. See Appendices A and B for interview protocols in English and Arabic.
9. See Appendices C and D for demographic information about the interview set.
10. The political climate in Syria is not conducive to carrying out fieldwork of any kind; in the middle of my study I had to ask for IRB approval to waive participant signatures due to participant fear of identification; therefore, tape recordings were indeed impractical.
11. Please see Corbin and Strauss (1990) for a detailed description of grounded theory epistemologies.
12. 50,000 Syrian Pounds is approximately 870 USD; 100,000 Syrian Pounds is approximately 1740 USD (as at the time of data collection).

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### **Appendix A. Interview questions template**

1. Tell me about your experiences in high school as you were close to graduating.
  - a. Did you hope to continue in school?
  - b. What did you hope to study?
  - c. What career did you hope to find in the future?
  - d. Who helped you make decisions?
2. Did you attend post-secondary education? (i.e. university or intermediate institute)
  - a. If so, where?
  - b. What [subject] did you study?
  - c. What year did you begin your studies?
  - d. What year you did you leave university?
    - i. Did you graduate?
    - ii. [If yes] What degree did you obtain?
  - e. Why did you decide to go to university?
3. (If attended university) Tell me about your experiences choosing a university and a major.
  - a. Did you feel like you had a choice of where and what to study?
  - b. Why did you decide to go to university?
  - c. What factors did you take into consideration in making your choice?
4. Tell me about your classes at [highest level of schooling].
  - a. Can you describe a typical day? (Professors, Assignments, Peers)
5. Tell me your opinions about the new private universities that have opened in Syria.
  - a. What do you know about them?
  - b. What do you think about them?
6. How do private and public universities compare with one another? Are there differences between the two?
7. Tell me about how people find jobs after they graduate.
8. Tell me about your experiences looking for a job or in the labour market.
  - a. Have you ever worked? If so, where?
  - b. How did you hear about your job?
9. Tell me what you know about the proposed changes to Syria's economy.
  - a. Are things changing? If so, what? How?
10. What are your opinions of employment in the private sector? Are you considering it?
11. Can you compare your experiences to the experiences of your parents' generation when they were going to school and looking for jobs?

## Appendix B. Interview questions template (Arabic)

مقدمة السلام عليكم  
 الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو التعرف أكثر على تجارب الشباب كطلّاب وكراغبين بالعمل في سوريا. إذا تلوّعت بالمشاركة في هذا البحث، سيتمّ سؤالك بالأجابة عن أسئلة تخصّ تجربتك خلال دراستك الثانوية والجامعية وكذلك بعد التخرج.

مشاركتك في هذا البحث اختيارية تماماً. إذا تلوّعت أن تشترك في هذا البحث، تستطيع أن توقف مشاركتك في أي وقت بدون انعكاسات سلبية عليك. تستطيع أن ترفض الأجابة على أي سؤال مطلوب منك. أرجو إعلامي في حالة عدم الرغبة في الأجابة على أي سؤال.

مشاركتك في هذا البحث ستبقى سرية حيث لن يتمّ الإفصاح عن اسمك بتاتا. اجوبتك ستكون كذلك سرية و سيتمّ استعمال اسم مستعار عند الإفصاح عن نتائج البحث. محتويات هذا الاستجواب ستسجل و تُحفظ في وثيقة الكترونية. سيتمّ تغيير اسمك وحفظ معلوماتك الشخصية في وثيقة الكترونية أخرى محمية بكلمة سر. الباحثة تستطيع إيقاف مشاركتك في هذا البحث في أي وقت، في حالة الإفصاح لمعلومات لها نتائج سلبية عليك أو على عائلتك.

## الأسئلة

الاسم (العمر (من أين؟) ووظيفة؟

- (1) هل تلتقيت التعليم في الجامعة ام المعاهد المتوسطة؟ لماذا أخذت القرار لإكمال الدراسة الجامعية؟
- أين درست؟ أي مادة تخصصت فيها؟ هل تخرجت؟
- (2) إحكى تجاربك في المدرسة الثانوية. متى قررت أن تدرس في الجامعة؟
- أي عمل رغبت فيه؟
- (3) من شجعك أو أرشدك في قرارك؟
- هل هناك ضغط اجتماعي/عائلي/اقتصادي أدى الى هذا القرار؟
- أي عوامل أخذتها في عين الاعتبار عندما كنت تفكر في دراسة جامعية وعندما قررت تخصصك؟
- (4) إحكى تجاربك في الجامعة وفي دراستك.
- إحكى عن المواد التدريسية؟
- هل يمكنك أن تصف أي يوم دراسي عادي؟ (من صدد الاساتذة والواجب وزمائك)
- (5) إحكى أراءك في الجامعات الخاصة الجديدة التي أسست في سوريا في السنوات الماضية القريبة؟ ما تعرف أي منها؟
- ما وجهة نظرك فيها؟
- (6) كيف تقارن الجامعات الحكومية بالجامعات الخاصة الجديدة؟ ما هو الاختلافات بينهما؟
- (7) قل لي: كيف يجد الشباب وظائف بعد التخرج؟ (مثل العائلة، الواسطة، الانترنت) ماذا تحتاج أن تفعله إذا أردت توظيف في وظيفة حكومية؟
- (8) إحكى تجارب بحثك عن العمل او وظيفة.
- (9) إحكى أراءك في التحول الاقتصادي الراهن في سوريا. هل يتغير الحال؟
- (10) هل تختلف حياة الشباب عن حياة الأجيال الأكبر من حيث العمل والدراسة؟ هل تستطيع أن تقارن بين تجاربك وتجارب والديك من صدد البحث عن العمل؟

**Appendix C. Interview set and demographic data**

ID	Age	Employed	Gender	High school track	Highest level education	National origin	High school type	Higher education type	University major or degree
1	23	Never employed	Male	Literary	Graduate	Syrian	Private	4-year public	Law
2	21	Never employed	Male	Literary	Graduate	Syrian	Public	4-year public	Law
3	20	Employed FT	Male	Literary	Some college	N/A	Public	2-year vocational	Business/Accounting
4	26	Never employed	Female	N/A	Middle school	Syrian	Public	N/A	N/A
5	25	Employed PT	Male	Literary	In college	Syrian	Public	4-year public	Law
6	20	Employed FT	Male	Literary	In college	Syrian	Public	2-year vocational	Applied Arts
7	31	Previously employed FT	Female	Literary	In college	Palestinian	Public	Open Learning	Translation
8	29	Employed FT	Female	Scientific	Graduate	Syrian	Public	4-year public	Medicine
9	20	Employed FT	Male	N/A	Middle school	Syrian	N/A	N/A	N/A
10	21	Never employed	Female	Scientific	In college	Syrian	Private	2-year vocational	Economics
11	18.5	Employed FT	Male	N/A	Middle school	Syrian	Public	N/A	N/A
12	21	Never employed	Female	Vocational	In college	Syrian	Public	4-year public	Business/Accounting
13	21	Previously employed PT	Male	Scientific	In college	Syrian	Private	2-year vocational	Business/Accounting
14	27	Employed PT	Male	Literary	In college	Syrian	Public	4-year public	French
15	21	Employed FT	Male	Scientific	In college	Palestinian	Public	Open Learning	Translation
16	24	Employed FT	Female	Scientific	Graduate	Syrian	Public	4-year vocational	English
17	21	Summer only	Male	Scientific	In college	Palestinian	Public	4-year public	Medicine
18	25	Previously employed PT	Female	N/A	In college	Syrian	N/A	Open Learning	Law
19	26	Employed FT	Male	Scientific	Graduate	Syrian	Public	Open Learning	Translation
20	26	Employed FT	Female	Scientific	Graduate	Syrian	Public	4-year public	Engineering
21	22	Summer only	Male	Scientific	In college	Syrian	Private	Private university	Medicine
22	24	Employed FT	Male	Scientific	Graduate	Syrian	Public	4-year public	Law

**Appendix D. Interview sample demographics**

Age-gender breakdown	Mean	Range
Female	25.38	21–31
Male	22.11	18–27

Highest education level	Gender frequency		Total Frequency	Percent
	Female	Male		
Middle school	1	2	3	13.63
Some college	0	1	1	4.55
Currently in college	4	7	11	50.00
Graduated college	3	4	7	31.82

High school track	Frequency	Percent total
Not applicable	4	18.18
Literary	7	31.82
Scientific	10	45.45
Technical or vocational	1	4.55

University major	Frequency	Percent total
Applied Arts	1	5.26
Business/Accounting	3	15.79
Economics	1	5.26
Engineering	1	5.26
English	1	5.26
French	1	5.26
Law	5	26.32
Medicine	3	15.79
Translation	3	15.79

Type of institution	Frequency	Percent of university attendees
2-year	4	21.05
4-year	15	78.95

Employment experience	Frequency	Percent total
Never employed	5	22.73
Employed full-time	10	45.45
Employed part-time	2	9.09
Previously employed PT	2	9.09
Previously employed FT	1	4.44
Summer only	2	9.09

**Appendix D.** Continued.

Socio-economic status	Frequency	Percent total
Lower SES	7	31.82
Middle SES	11	50
Upper SES	4	18.18