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A SYRIAN EDUCATIONALIST IN THE USA

*Reflections on Human Relations, Practical Skills,
and Intellectual Empowerment*

Q. Tell us a little about who you are, about some of the most significant milestones in your personal/professional life, and your most noteworthy achievements as an educator/scholar/citizen. Locate and position yourself within the socio-political and historical movements that define who and what you are, and where you 'stand'.

I was born in a small village on the outskirts of Homs (Syria) to a family of modest means but great confidence in its members. The community in which I grew up had little resources beyond farming, manual labour, and vending business. This unpropitious economic condition did not disturb the simple and happy life of the community, but it did stratify people based on their possessions, income, and position. Though my parents had no formal education, they believed in schooling as a means for socioeconomic mobility and financial security. My parents instilled in me the importance of hard work, high grades, and a sense of responsibility for my family and community. My family's orientation has allowed me to excel in my primary, middle, and high school education. I completed a bachelor's degree in English Literature from Al-Baath University, Syria in 1999. I received an award from the Syrian Ministry of Education as the top graduate in my department and a letter of distinction from the College of Arts and Humanities for having the highest average throughout the history of the College. In the same year, I was listed as the top Humanities graduate in the country by the yearly *The Top Graduate Record* (Published by the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education). I moved to the United States in 2001, where I completed my graduate studies and obtained two doctoral degrees, one in Education and another in Linguistics. I currently teach at Utah State University in the United States.

A major milestone in my personal life is the death of my father in 1994, which has allowed me to re-examine my thoughts about life and afterlife, reconsider the purpose of my human existence, and rearrange my priorities in life. On the professional level, my graduation as the top student in my college and the subsequent awards I received from the Ministry of Higher Education are major milestones in my career. I came to believe in myself and in my ability to improve my life and the lives of those around me. For the first time in my life, I came to 'experience' the value of

education and its role in defining who we are and what we are. This experience provided me with the momentum to pursue my first doctoral degree in the United States and later overcome the minor difficulties I faced as a 'stranger' in the new culture. My concentration on my graduate studies in the U.S. left me little time to explore the American social life yet allowed me to finish my first doctoral degree in Education in three years (2001-2004, the Ohio State University). At this point, I started to ponder on how much we humans can and cannot achieve, the relevance of what we achieve to the lives of others, and the utility of our 'knowledge' for dealing with real-life problems.

My biggest achievement as an educator has been my ability to relate to students from different backgrounds, share and discuss with them thoughts and ideas, and allow them to see the world from multiple perspectives and explore critically and systematically different modes of thinking, practice, and beliefs. I have received several teaching distinctions in the past ten years, which reflect my positive contribution to the education and lives of my students. In terms of scholarly work, I have published a number of papers and a book on education, educational change, and cultural relevance that I hope will benefit researchers and scholars interested in the connection between education, community, and culture. I have also published a number of articles that focus on the intersection between education, language, culture, and technology. In these works, I tried to bring to scholarly attention the importance of re-examining the assumptions upon which the new technologies are based (McLuhan, 1964), how they can limit or expand our cultural views, and their relevance to wider societal issues and concerns. The comments and inquiries that I received from colleagues in several developing countries, particularly in the Middle East and Africa, point to the relevance of these works to a wide audience.

Q. What have been some of the most formative moments in your own education? Here you can also tell readers about the individuals, movements, organisations, etc that were most influential in shaping your development as an educator/scholar/citizen.

The most formative moments in my education were in my primary school. I was very lucky to have a group of committed, caring, and enthusiastic teachers. From these teachers, I learned that a teacher-student relationship can extend beyond the classroom and that teaching is not merely about subject matter but also about compassion, empathy, and care. I remember one day when I was sick, unable to go to school. On this same day, my first-grade teacher, Sahar Hamduun, dropped by my house after school, without prior arrangement, and mentioned how the class, my colleagues and herself were sad that I had not been able to attend classes. This was not about absence, class, or teaching; it was about human relationships. I think that, if anything, my educational experience in Syria was the most crucial in the development of the moral and ethical side of me, the educator and citizen.

My study in the United States was a transformative experience for me in different ways. I arrived in the U.S. a few months before the September 11th attacks, full of enthusiasm, hope, and confidence. My move to study in the United States did not

initially carry any surprises in terms of educational expectations and social changes. I was mentally prepared for the new experience and was mostly excited about the opportunities it could provide. My initial longing to my home and family was assuaged, first, by my determination to succeed and, second, by my ability to create my own little world of study and study alone. However, the world that I constructed for myself was soon shaken by a sequence of events that the September 11th attacks brought with them. The attacks, the images of the victims, and the world reaction to the tragedy were used by American media outlets to manipulate the American public opinion with regard to what exactly happened and reinforce some of the already existent misconceptions about Arabs and Muslims. The consistent and deliberate vilification of Arabs and Muslims shook my inner self and mind. My dilemma was how to reconcile the media-made reality with my idyllic image of my people and community. In the first year of my graduate studies, I spent much time studying Arab history and civilizations. I also studied the history of Islam, particularly the life of Prophet Mohammad. I read not only about his life story, but also about his teachings and his manners. These readings helped me reaffirm my identity and restore my confidence in my beliefs, my people, and myself. At the same, the framework within which the media presented these events and the people who were involved started to nurture in me various forms of scepticism about man-made knowledge and reality, which became central to my development as a scholar. More importantly, this experience has taught me a great deal about the power of words not only to influence thinking and control behaviour, but also to change history. Thinking from an educator's perspective, I started to reconsider the role of words in defining who I am as an educator, my role in the classroom, and my ability to push students to grow and succeed.

My study experience in the U.S. was illuminating in another respect, as it helped me to compare and contrast different educational systems. Unlike its counterparts in most Arab countries, including Syria, the American educational system is more flexible and decentralized. For example, courses that seem to be overlapping in terms of topics and goals could be presented using completely different methods and from divergent perspectives. Likewise, polemics initiated by the student are often favoured to normative arguments provided in assigned course materials. My exposure to different educational systems in a number of Arab countries and the United States has been a primary landmark in my career as an educator and researcher. These experiences have exposed me not only to new ideas about the meanings of education, learning, teaching, schools, community, culture, and so on, but also to the influence of the socio-political atmosphere in defining different educational phenomena and criteria.

Q. What are some of the key educational 'problematics' that currently preoccupy you? How are these linked to the broader preoccupations you may have about society? What is your response to these problematics and preoccupations, as a scholar and as a citizen?

The problematics of education vary from one country to another and are often shaped by the socio-political and economic situation in each society. Based on my previous experience in Syria, as both a student and a teacher, I think that the main problematic of the Syrian educational system lies in its heavily centralized, top-down nature. Centralized education here refers to the existence of a central official body, such as the ministry of education, which seeks to control the means and ends of the educational process. This paradigm of education is enacted by national educational policies that dictate standards, goals, textbooks, curricula, methods, and assessment techniques. The realization of this paradigm is facilitated by the fact that decisions regarding the distribution of resources, training of teachers, and determining the content of curricula are centred in the hands of a few decision-makers.

Centralized, top-down education often manifests itself in the classroom and in the practices of the classroom authority, namely, the teacher. The teacher's role is to implement this national policy by making use of the available textbooks, standards, goals, and evaluation techniques. In terms of pedagogy, teachers often adopt what Freire (1970) called 'paternalistic' pedagogy, where the teacher assumes the role of the expert and learners assume the role of 'passive receivers' of knowledge. Teachers adopt this approach not only because it reflects the way they were taught but also because their training does not provide them with alternatives. Moreover, teachers are in some way obliged to follow this method because they have to prepare their students for standardized tests. In Syria, for example, the transition from middle school to the literary, scientific, vocational, and technical branches of high school is determined by a national test. A national test is also used to distribute 'successful' high school students among the different colleges and disciplines.

Students are required to absorb the material, memorize it, and re-produce it on the exam sheets. Students' success or failure is measured by their ability to memorize the material imparted by the teachers and contained in the textbooks. In fact, students are stratified in terms of their eligibility to different colleges (medicine, engineering, arts, etc.) based on their memorization capabilities. More importantly, because education is a major factor in socioeconomic mobility, the students' careers and socioeconomic statuses become bound by their ability to memorize. For students, the outcome of this educational process is therefore the internalization of a lot of information without having the incentive to think about it, reflect about it, appraise its validity, or consider its relevance to their own lives. This form of education is detrimental to the growth of the intellectual, humane, and critical faculties of students as productive social agents.

Another major problem concerns the incongruity between the level of educational planning and national needs. The identification of national needs is often not based on research or careful assessment but on the improvised decisions of a few educational administrators or on the experiences of senior educators. Little research is done about the needs and capacity of the job market, the exact resources required for implementing national plans, and the best methods to attain the desired goals. Further, the particular needs of the teachers and students do not factor in the plans-

needs equation. For example, in the past sixty years or so the educational system has produced much more doctors, engineers, teachers, technicians and other specialists than the Syrian local market can absorb. This explains the high rate of unemployment in the country in general and among college graduates in particular. Ironically, many private companies still rely on foreign expertise, particularly engineers and scientists, because most of the local graduates have little hands-on or research experience. A recent informal survey by a group of researchers from Damascus University and the United Nations Development Programme shows that the three major concerns of Syrian graduates are ‘the gap between their theoretical knowledge and reality,’ ‘their little practical experience,’ and ‘the few work opportunities’ (*Watan* Newspaper, 5 Aug., 2010). Under the title ‘Syrian graduates’ jobs are to search for jobs and employment offices succeeded only in counting them,’ the pan-Arab daily newspaper *Al-Hayat* (6 Sept., 2010) reports the same patterns, with graduates attributing their dilemma to lack of experience and outdated educational curricula. Thus, many of the university graduates work in wage labour jobs and other low-paying jobs. Many graduates remain unemployed and therefore become a burden on the economy. Unofficial estimates put the proportion of graduates who are unemployed at thirty percent.

Many of the talented students choose to continue their education in more educationally and technologically advanced countries, particularly in the United States and Europe, and most of them stay there after the completion of their studies. This brain drain has a major effect on the educational, social, and economic well-being of the whole country. For example, the fact that most of the skilled and talented individuals stay outside the country leaves many of the key administrative positions in the ministries of education, economy, and social work in the hands of less qualified administrators, most of whom are mainly exposed to the Syrian model and therefore may not be able to offer new insights and developments into these ministries. Overall, the top-down model of education with its reliance on rote memorization, outdated curricula, *ad hoc* educational plans, and unclear vision of how to link education to development programs are main sources of problems in Syrian education.

Q. What are your reflections about the major forces that are shaping educational practice in your country/region? What are the dynamics and interests that underpin these forces, and what kinds of challenges do they represent for the articulation of an education project in your country/region?

Since its independence from France in 1946, Syria has witnessed a great deal of socio-political turmoil in terms of internal power conflict, military coups, and social unrest. The number of military coups between 1948 and 1970 is a world-breaking number of fifty. The political and social institutions were fragile, short-lived, and liable to dramatic changes between the successive Syrian governments. The disputing factions often restricted their arenas of struggle to the military and political domains. Education, as a social institution, played a marginal role in this socio-political conflict.

With the ascendance of the Al-Baath Party to power in 1963, a major shift happened; education came to occupy a central role in the Party's socialist and nationalist agenda. The Party's socialist and nationalist vision is reflected in its constitution, which states that 'Education is one of the State's duties by itself. Therefore, all foreign and private educational establishments shall be cancelled' (Article 45—the Syrian Ministries of Education and Higher Education have only recently licensed several private schools and universities). Furthermore, the Syrian Constitution states that 'The educational system aims at creating a socialist nationalist Arab generation...' (Article 21). This vision is materialized in the policy of centralizing the educational system as well as in the curricula. For example, a 'national education' course was added as a mandatory subject throughout the stages of primary, middle, high school and college. As the Party's constitution itself indicates, education under the Party's leadership is to serve different social purposes, the most important of which is to produce new generations that adopt the ideals of socialism and Arab nationalism.

Another front on which educational planners worked was the provision of equitable education for all, which again reflects the Party's goal to eliminate 'class discrimination' between different members of the society (Article 42). Equitable education meant providing similar learning opportunities to students through the centralization of education, standardization of curricula, goals, and assessment, and uniformity of training provided to teachers. This policy is a reaction to the pre-independence discriminatory policies which provided urban populations greater access to education, better educational facilities and resources, and more job privileges. The new policy have played a role in narrowing the social and economic gaps between different social groups (e.g. urban versus rural populations) which were the hallmark of the pre-independence socioeconomically stratified society.

However, the current configuration of the educational system may not be simply considered as a straightforward outcome of the political orientation of the ruling party. In fact, it is reasonable to say that the educational system was mainly influenced by the ethnically, religiously, and ideologically diverse nature of Syrian society. Educational planners were careful not to include in the curricula any politically sensitive, socially divisive, and religiously discriminating material. The rationale was to maintain the existing social order without arousing any sectarian tensions. Rather than opening the doors for discussion and dialogue, which may or may not always be productive, the strategy was to ignore these differences as though they did not exist. The curricula therefore emphasized conformity and allegiance to the central government rather than to ethnic, political, ideological, religious, or social affiliations. Stirring these 'socially and politically destructive issues', let alone critiquing them, became a political taboo. With the absence of well-defined criteria on what social 'destruction' is, neither teachers nor students had interest in taking the risk of discussing social and political issues that are part of their everyday lives yet may endanger their careers. The rule for the teachers was to stick to the curricula and for the students to focus on the material provided to them.

Overall, the fundamentals of the educational system in Syria are shaped largely by the very nature of Syrian society and its recent political history. The use of education for ideological purposes has become more visible since 1963, with the promotion of socialist and Arab nationalist principles.

Q. Which authors/texts would you single out as being of utmost importance if one wishes to understand educational dynamics in your country/region? How do you use these authors/texts in your own work? Feel free to cite an extended passage, and to comment on it in ways that add further insights into your own thinking.

There are three main authors whose insights on education and its relationships to larger societal issues are relevant to understanding the educational dynamics in Syria. The first is Paulo Freire, especially his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). This work is particularly important for understanding the relationship between teachers and students in the ‘banking’ system of education. According to Freire, the banking educational system is characterized by the existence of two poles in the educational process: the teacher and the student. The teacher’s main role is to deposit information in the minds of the students, who themselves become the depositories. The student’s role is restricted to ‘receiving, filing, and storing the deposits’ (p.72). But eventually, Freire argues, ‘[k]nowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other’ (p.72). In other words, the mere transmission of information does not necessarily ensure learning.

Another author who deals particularly with education in the Arab World and whose work is relevant to understanding the situation of the educational apparatus in Syria is the Palestinian scholar Munir Fasheh. In an important paper published in 1990, and titled ‘Community education: to reclaim and transform what has been made invisible’, Fasheh criticizes the formal models of education that are ‘abstract’, ‘symbolic’ and ‘theoretic’ and that have no connection to real world problems—in his case, problems associated with occupation. According to him, these forms of education are as destructive as the machinery used to kill Palestinians. Moreover, education becomes hegemonic when it assimilates ‘concepts, values, language, relations, and interests’ that are external to the community life. In fact, he calls these forms of education hegemonic not only because of the alien ideas they include, but also because of their exclusion of forms of knowledge that are germane to the local people, resources, and environment. He calls for a community education that builds on the available strengths and resources of the community as well as the practical needs of the people. Fasheh also urges local intellectuals who are trained in Western institutions to re-pay their societies, cultures, and peoples by participating in the community education.

The work of the Syrian educational psychologist, Fakher Aqel, is also pertinent for comprehending some of the basic needs of the Syrian educational system. Aqel suggests that an educational system may fall short of its desired national goals when

it is cut off from its social surroundings and from the history of the nation. He therefore suggests that educational practices require 'originality' in terms of defining the needs of the society, addressing these needs, and availing the successful experiences in the history of the nation. Taking insights from the history and current situation of the country allows for the evolution of educational models that can further the development efforts of the country.

I find the works of these three authors insightful because they touch on the main ailments of the Syrian educational system. Freire's work envisions a new form of education, where knowledge is not received but created by the students and where teaching becomes a form of cultivating creative and critical thinking as well as a form of social empowerment. Fasheh's notion of community education underscores one of the major problems of the Syrian educational system, which often has little connection with the local people and the daily challenges facing the Syrian society. Thus, it invites a form of education that is more practical, purposeful, and inductive to the development of the learners and the local community. Aqel's emphasis on the originality of education and its relation to the sources of power in the community is also critical for addressing some of the gaps in the existing educational plans. I believe that combining the humanistic, pragmatic, and innovative aspects of education, which are supported respectively by Freire, Fasheh, and Aqel, is necessary for the success of the educational process in Syria.

Q. Which recent developments/innovations in the education sector in your country fill you with hope in terms of furthering the agenda of democracy, and of equity? Which recent developments do you feel most critical of, and why?

The terms 'democracy' and 'equity' are both abstract and elusive not only because they are relative (rather than absolute), but also because their meanings are malleable to socio-historical context, reality, and circumstances. Democracy and equity become more problematic when we consider the potential benchmarks against which democratic or equitable education is measured. Nonetheless, we humans often intuitively identify whether a certain action, practice, or plan carries some 'marks' of democracy or equity. Intuition is the term that may best capture my attempt to relate 'democracy' and 'equity' to the Syrian educational context. My intuitive reading of the developments outlined below is not based on first-hand experience but on observation of different reports, analyses, and information from the Ministry of Education, media, and educators.

In the past few years, the Syrian Ministry of Education has adopted a national plan to develop the outdated educational system. The plan, which is still underway and which is supposed to be in place in 2021, was formulated in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The national plan consists of twelve related projects that aim, among many other objectives, to engage parents and community members in the education of their children, focus the dynamics of the learning process on the student, limit the role of the teacher to facilitation and guidance, offer additional opportunities for

distinguished students, and provide training opportunities for teachers and other educators.

I will focus on three projects that promise to blossom into some form of a democratic and equitable educational system (not necessarily society). The first project regards the creation of new curricula. The new curricula seek to place students at the centre of the learning process, enhance their abilities to solve real-life problems, and build their practical skills. In a recent press release, the Deputy Minister of Education Farah Sulieman Al-Mutlaq confirmed that the new curricula come with a whole package of changes that includes teacher training, new goals and standards, and new evaluation methods. The promise of these changes lies in their potential to develop critical thinking skills and hands-on experiences that are needed for the growth of the intellectual, humane and professional faculties of the students. Naturally, these skills are the mark of productive and responsible citizenry.

A second major project concerns the integration of technology in learning, including the creation of a local net that connects schools to each other and to the server of the Ministry. According to the Ministry, the aim is not only to equip students with basic technological skills to survive in the age of technology, but also to use different technological media in their own learning. The integration of technology (particularly the Internet) goes hand in hand with the implementation of the new curricula. For example, in ‘the experimental stage’ of the new curricula, students are sometimes asked to find information about certain real-life problems on the internet and to evaluate this information. This project offers a lot of potential because it supports students’ autonomy in exploring, evaluating, and selecting the relevant information that may not necessarily be provided by the teacher or the textbook. The problem here is that many Syrian schools and homes do not have access to the Internet, which has induced much criticism for the new national plan.

The third project focuses on involving parents and community members in decision-making with respect to the schooling of their children. For example, community members may provide suggestions about student learning styles, teaching methods, classroom settings, and so on. Individual members of the community can also contribute to the equipment of the schools from their private income. The participation of parents and community members in the education of their children may prove productive not only for bettering the learning experiences of the children themselves but also for empowering the parents and the community.

The new curricula are implemented experimentally this year. Surprisingly, the curricula have been met by a storm of criticism from parents, teachers, students, and university faculty. The leading newspapers in the country have reported major concerns about the curricula and the accompanying changes. Among these concerns are the lack of infrastructure, the poor training of the teachers, and even the blurred vision about the details of the change process. I think that these criticisms may only be a reaction to change. As Marshall & Ruohonen (1998, p.1) observe, change, whether related to humans or organizations, is a ‘fitful process’ that is often characterized by many obstacles and regressions. Despite their potential and well-

intentioned goals, these projects may not necessarily contribute to the creation of a democratic or equitable educational system. Many societal issues can influence this process, especially when the socio-political ambience is not supportive of it.

Q. What comments would you care to make about the impact of globalisation and/or regionalisation (e.g. Europeanisation) on educational development in your country/region?

Syrian education, like its counterparts in several other developing countries, is torn between the impact of globalization and the need for regionalization. In fact, the new national educational plan and the ongoing changes in the Syrian educational system are mostly instigated by the encroaching requirements of the new global economy, cultural forms, media, and technologies of communication. As expressed by several Syrian educational planners, the changes aim to prepare students for the information age, integrate technology in the learning experiences of the students, and enhance the critical processing of information. The partnership between the Ministry of Education and UNESCO is not only an indicator of the Ministry's acquiescence to the demands of globalization, but also its desire to learn from the experiences of technologically more advanced countries.

Regardless of whether they relate to globalization or whether they will help enhance the socio-economic potential of the country, the new initiatives are important and necessary for equipping students with skills indispensable for the job market, for the intellectual and social well-being of the students, and for opening new opportunities for the community to participate in decisions that touch the foundations of their own lives. It should be remembered that the main advancements that countries such as China, India, and Malaysia are witnessing can be traced to major developments in their educational systems. For example, Malaysia, one of the most technologically advanced countries in Asia, owes much of its rapid economic growth to its huge investment in the educational system, which, according to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, has ranged between 16% and 20% of the overall government expenditure in the past twenty years.

Despite their search for change that cope with the challenges posed by the global developments around them, the top educational administrators of the country still place these changes within a 'national framework.' For example, the Ministry of Education has developed national benchmarks designed to gauge the outcomes of these changes in terms of the societal needs. Much emphasis is also placed on the importance of national identity, belonging, history, and so on. It seems to me that the Ministry's vision of maintaining a balance between the demands of globalization and national needs is important for both attaining global economic competitiveness and attending to community priorities. Moreover, it helps create identity-balanced individuals who can compete in the global economy and simultaneously serve their own communities in meaningful ways. But again, it is too early to judge the future direction of the new initiatives, particularly in the light of the current discontent with their implementation

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