A Lifeline to Academics at Risk

Around the world, academics put their lives on the line by studying and teaching. Stephen Wordsworth examines how Cara works with academic refugees to save them and their lives’ work from persecution and worse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEPHEN WORDSWORTH has worked in London as the Executive Director of Cara (the Council for At-Risk Academics) since 2012. He is also Vice-Chair of the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (New York). Previously, he worked in the British Diplomatic Service, and served as Ambassador in Belgrade, Serbia.

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The e-mail which Ahmad* sent to Cara told a familiar story, but more eloquently than usual. He was in Syria, and he remembered it as a peaceful country, with the everyday trappings of a settled life — bird song, the smell of roses, people bustling about their business, schools and universities that young people were happy to go to.

By the time he was writing, however, those days had gone. No more bird song, just the rattle of bullets and the blast of explosions. No more flowers, just ruins and the smell of gunpowder and death. No more bustling crowds, just people looking stunned, as if their minds and souls were far away. And schools and universities occupied by armed fanatics, who had turned them into jails and torture centers.

Everyday life was bad enough for anyone who had to move around to try to earn a living, with the risk of being injured or killed by a stray bullet. Or by a random act of checkpoint violence. Or by being kidnapped for ransom by gangs roaming the streets. But Ahmad had another problem too. He was a medical specialist, and since he worked in a state hospital he was a particular target for the extremists, who were set on killing any “regime collaborators.” On several occasions, he escaped attacks on his way to his night shift.
Eventually, even Ahmad could take no more, his commitment to his patients and students buckling under the strain of realizing that he would be no use to them dead, which was likely to be his fate if he continued to go to the hospital. But getting out wasn’t easy either. He didn’t want just to run away. He wanted to go somewhere where he could do further research, so that when he went back — as he was determined to do, one day — he would have new skills, and be a better doctor.

Fortunately, he heard about Cara, an organization set up in 1933 by academics and scientists in the UK to rescue their colleagues who were being forced to flee from the Nazis: at first, mainly Jews, but later others too. Cara’s founders’ aim had been two-fold — ‘the relief of suffering and the defense of learning and science’ — saving the people, of course, but also saving the knowledge and intellectual capital that they carried in their heads, and making sure it could be put to use, for the good of all. In all, some two thousand people were saved in the period 1933-39. In the years that followed, many achieved great distinction, including sixteen who went on to win Nobel prizes.

Over eighty years later, our mission is essentially the same. There are still many places around the world where intellectuals who are ready to speak their mind are seen as a danger by repressive governments and extremist groups, who will go to any lengths, including murder, to silence them. Women academics can face particular threats from radicals, even among their own students and colleagues, who start to find fault with the way they dress, the way they talk — and ultimately with the fact that they dare to work at all. Elsewhere, the risk may be more general, with conflict convulsing society, basic utilities like water and power out of use, law and order breaking down, and schools and universities unable to function. In recent months, most appeals to us for help have, not surprisingly, come from Syria, but altogether we support some 260 people, and over 300 members of their families, from 27 different countries across the globe. These are, by far, the highest levels of need since the 1930s, as noted in our most recent annual report.

Our organization helps beleaguered academics by checking their qualifications and gathering references, and then by working with them to approach some of its 120-plus university partners who might be able to take them in and offer them support. All the people we assist have held teaching or research positions at university already, and most already have doctorates, so they are usually looking to do advanced research in their respective fields. They travel on regular visas — not as refugees — with the clear aim, like Ahmad, of returning home when they can, taking their newly-gained skills with them. Many, coming from conflict areas, have little if any money of their own, and with our support the host universities usually agree to take on much or all of the cost, with the charity covering any balance.

This support transforms, sometimes even saves, their lives. A couple of weeks ago, we brought about thirty of our Fellows together, and it was extraordinary to hear them talk, almost humbly, about the dangers they had been facing — the academic who had signed a petition criticizing her government’s policy, and had immediately been fired and subjected to death threats over social media; the university lecturer who had spoken out against the regime, and had then found the front row of his lectures occupied menacingly by very “un-secret” secret policemen; the researcher whose home had been repeatedly ransacked because of his work on minority rights; the professor whose efforts to expose corruption and human rights abuses had resulted in intrusive police surveillance and threats to his life. Like most people who have been forced to flee, they were relieved to be safe; but, at the same time, very worried about the friends and family they had had to leave behind, and about their own longer-term futures. Two of our young Syrian fellows who were there have recently also helped to make a short video about what they have had to leave behind, what they are doing now and their hopes of returning home in the future. It gives a very moving account of what it really means to be an academic in exile.

Not long ago, I spoke to Ahmad again. He had about a year of his research placement in the UK still to go, but he was quite clear that, when the moment came, he would return to Syria — “come what may,” as he put it. I talked to him about the risks he would be facing, but his mind was made up. He had been away long enough; his hospital and his patients would need him; it was his duty to return. He is a brave man.

* Ahmad’s name has been changed to protect his identity.