

Combating War with Education: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Syrian Youth**Need:**

My project will provide Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) instruction and resources for Syrian refugee college-aged students in Reyhanli, Turkey, expanding educational opportunities for Syrian students and providing alternatives to joining violent factions in Syria. I will collaborate with the Reyhanli Center, the only free test-prep center in southern Turkey, to reach an extensive network of 1,200 students and ensure infrastructural sustainability after I have left. I will also rely on the Skype tutoring program Paper Airplanes that I founded to provide students with additional English instruction after my project ends. By providing alternatives to violence, I hope to work towards eventual peace in Syria.

Background:

The Syrian crisis began in March 2011 when Syrian citizens demanded the end of forty year military rule under the present dictator Bashar al-Assad. Protests soon degenerated into a violent war involving fractionalized rebel groups, the Syrian military, and beginning in 2013, extreme Islamist groups like al-Nusra and ISIS. Over 210,000 people have died since 2011, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, over 7.5 million have been internally displaced, and over 3.3 million have fled the country, with over 50% of all refugees under the age of 18 according to the UNOCHA. There are over 1.2 million refugees in Turkey and over 70,000 in Reyhanli, a small town five kilometers from the Syrian border.

For Syrian youth, education provides the road out of poverty, equips them with the skills necessary to rebuild their country, and keeps them out of armed opposition groups perpetuating the violence. Yet as Reyhanli Center Director Rami Traboulsi explained to me, Syrian youth face a severe lack of educational opportunities from the strained Turkish educational infrastructure. This puts many Syrians at risk of joining violent groups, particularly males between ages 18 and 26. While Syrians are technically allowed to attend Turkish universities, these universities have limited slots and require a language proficiency exam, most commonly the TOEFL exam, which is also required for American universities. According to Metin Corabatir, head of the Research Center on Asylum and Migration, most refugees cannot afford TOEFL classes and have limited access to free resources. As a result, a recent UC-Davis study concluded that as few as 1-2% Syrian university-age students in Turkey were enrolled in a Turkish university in 2014, and fewer were enrolled abroad. In all of southern Turkey, which alone houses over 300,000 Syrian refugees, there is one center providing free TOEFL-prep courses. The Reyhanli Center has over 1,200 enrolled students and is both understaffed and ill-equipped.

In the summer of 2013, I taught English in Reyhanli to over forty elementary Syrian refugee students under a Carleton grant, relying on a wooden alphabet puzzle, sporadic song and dance, a bit of soccer, and my own curriculum. While there, I spoke with dozens of college-aged Syrians who needed TOEFL preparation. In response I founded Paper Airplanes, an English tutoring program via Skype that pairs American college students with Syrians hoping to improve their English. Relying on technology to which most Syrians in the region have access, the program has worked to both improve students' English and disassemble stereotypes. Since I founded the program six months ago, it has grown from twelve to over sixty total participants, still a small fraction of students without English instruction. During my most recent trip to Reyhanli in December 2014, the town was safe but underserved. I spoke with Reyhanli Center Manager Rami Traboulsi and Watan Manager Said al-Zarzar, who both described substantial unmet educational needs of Syrian youth. I hope to use my previous experience teaching English in Reyhanli, my knowledge of the TOEFL through founding Paper Airplanes, and my proficiency in Arabic to improve TOEFL instruction and resources available to Syrian students.

Current Gaps:

1. Reyhanli has more than doubled in population since 2012, with over 70,000 Syrians living in the town. Around 50% of these Syrians are under age 18. Most but not all Syrians are living in rented apartments with working Internet. Only the Reyhanli Center is providing free TOEFL prep courses in the Hatay Province.

2. The Reyhanli Center has no native English speakers or official TOEFL-prep resources, both of which are necessary for students to receive competitive scores particularly on the oral and speaking section of the exam.
3. The only TOEFL test-taking center is in Gaziantep, a four hour bus ride away from Reyhanli. This makes it both expensive and at times nearly impossible for students to both register¹ and take the exam.
4. According to Director Traboulsi, students have limited knowledge on the college application process, meaning most are left in the dark even after they take the TOEFL exam.

Short-Term Project Outcomes:

1. For seven weeks, I will provide TOEFL instruction to 1,200 college-aged students at the Reyhanli Center. Drawing upon my knowledge of the English language, extensive understanding of the American college application process, and familiarity with the TOEFL exam, I will work alongside current Syrian instructors to supplement instruction in order to better reflect the exam and college application process.
2. I will provide the Center with the Quest English textbook series² and the official TOEFL test-prep textbook to enhance instruction after I have left. I will also purchase two desktop computers to increase student access to technological resources for studying purposes and for my Paper Airplanes Skype tutoring program.
3. I will provide individual college application assistance to students, relying on my knowledge of the application process and my experience assisting students in application writing at the Carleton Career Center. Additionally, I will run a series of workshops, providing teachers with knowledge of the application process.
4. For the top twenty students who score the highest on a TOEFL practice exam administered at the beginning of week 7, I will pay for their registration fee and round-trip bus fare to the TOEFL test center in Gaziantep. To ensure student attendance, I will require each student to sign a form promising they will take the test.
5. Working with TOEFL and Antakya city leadership, I will begin the process of opening a TOEFL test center in the Hatay Province so that the test is more accessible to Syrians living in southern Turkey.

Long-Term Project Sustainability:

1. Linking with my English tutoring program Paper Airplanes, initially I will connect fifty students with Paper Airplanes and increase the number of students as the capacity of Paper Airplanes expands.
2. After students take the TOEFL, I will continue to provide students with application assistance after I leave through Paper Airplanes and a partner organization College Possible, which currently provides college application support to low-income Americans and is eager to expand support to Syrian students.

Time Table:

Week 1: Leave the U.S. July 15 and arrive in Istanbul the following morning, avoiding Ramadan. Travel to Antakya, and settle in through the weekend during Eid celebrations. Begin teaching Monday, July 20.

Weeks 1-7: Teach Monday - Friday, eight hours per day to two or three classes of forty to fifty students. I will collaborate with Syrian instructors and link each student with a Paper Airplanes tutor.

End of Week 7: Administer TOEFL practice exam Friday, September 4. Pay for registration fees of top thirty students after they have signed an official form ensuring they will take the TOEFL exam.

Expected Outcomes:

With the educational opportunities that the TOEFL provides, young Syrians are not only less at risk for fighting, but will receive an education that will better equip them to rebuild their country in the coming decades. I hope to not only improve the lives of the students I teach, but to improve the resources at the Center, assist efforts to establish a closer test-taking center, and expand the reach of Paper Airplanes so that the assistance continues long after I have left. My experience both teaching in Reyhanli and running an English-assistance program leave me well-equipped to carry out this project.

¹ Most Syrians do not have bank accounts in Turkey, meaning they cannot register online and forcing them to go to Gaziantep twice.

² This series was recommended by Carleton ESL expert Renata Fitzpatrick.