

Refugees reclaim human rights with technology

November 28 2018, by Julia Ann Easley And Joe Proudman



A refugee camp sits among agriculture fields in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. While most Syrian refugees live in apartments and in urban settings, some live in temporary camps, working in the agriculture fields. Credit: Joe Proudman / UC Davis

Arabic bounces off the walls of a small room in a nondescript building in

Lebanon's notorious Bekaa Valley. About a dozen Syrian refugees carefully take photos of their diplomas and training certificates. One young man steadies a document on the brace around his left leg—a reminder of the civil war that has driven millions from their country, many here to Lebanon.

Jawad Kaysaneyya was in his first year of college, studying to be a civil engineer like his father, when he fled eastern Ghouta shortly after the war started.

War derailed his dreams, and continues to do so in Lebanon, where he's lived since 2012.

"In the whole world, if you are Syrian, you have nothing. You have no rights. You have no life," Kaysaneyya said, in English. "I lived a life, and it's not the one I was dreaming about."

But dreams have a way of persisting, especially with a little help. The web-based platform where these young Syrian adults are uploading their documents aims to remove obstacles to their aspirations.

From UC Davis, the Article 26 Backpack is a new humanitarian tool that displaced people are using to securely store and share documents, such as transcripts and resumes, with universities, scholarship agencies and employers. Nearly 600 people have created virtual backpacks since the project launched in Lebanon this spring.

"I think it's giving a chance for those people, for them, to erase the stigma," said Doha Albared, a computer science student at the American University of Beirut, or AUB, who helps users set up Backpacks. "But when we give those people a chance, in order to pursue what they started—maybe their academic achievements, or career, or whatever—you're enabling them to erase that stigma."

The Article 26 Backpack grew out of the efforts of UC Davis professor Keith David Watenpaugh to address the suffering caused by attacks on students and scholars, institutions of higher learning and academic freedom. Supported by a \$500,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, it takes its name from that icon of student life plus the article in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that established—70 years ago next month—the right to education.

Many refugees have fled without the papers so vital to getting an education or work. Their transcripts are incomplete, their diplomas are missing, or their professional certifications are not recognized. It is not only difficult—but also costly and even dangerous—to seek documents from Syrian universities and state agencies. Any physical documents refugees do have risk being lost, stolen or destroyed in the uncertain environments in which they live.

"If I'm telling you something, you're not going to believe me if I don't have the evidence, and those documents are the evidence," said Albared. "They're super, super important."

The head of the burgeoning human rights program at UC Davis, Watenpaugh fears a generation is being lost to the ongoing civil war in Syria that has displaced or made refugees of more than 12 million people.



Keith David Watenpaugh, right, a professor and director of the UC Davis Human Rights program, and Eslam Abo Alhawa, center, help Ali Almarzouki register for the Article 26 Backpack in the Bekaa Valley. Credit: Joe Proudman / UC Davis

"Unless these [young people](#) have access to continuing education," Watenpaugh said, "they will not have that kind of capital that they can take with them back to Syria to help rebuild it or move to new societies where they can become leaders." Education, as the path to integrating them back into society, is, he said, "so important to confront ideologies of hate and xenophobia that seem to be on the rise not only in Europe but also in the Western Hemisphere."

About 1 percent of refugees have access to higher education, tremendously fewer than the 36 percent of global youth with access, according to the United Nations [refugee](#) agency.

Like Kaysaneyya, many are frustrated in their attempts to pursue education and put what education they do have to work.

"They have masters degree, they are well educated, but they don't have the opportunities to use them," said Eslam Abo Alhawa, a computer science student at AUB and Backpack guide. "They don't have job opportunities, and even many of them they are not able to continue their master's degree or even their baccalaureate degrees. They don't have these opportunities to show their skills."



Watenpaugh, walks through a refugee camp where they register people for the Backpack the Bekaa Valley. Credit: Joe Proudman / UC Davis

Watenpaugh is working with the Beirut-based university to reach out to refugees at camps and community centers as well as through social

media.

The guides, like Albared and Abo Alhawa, provide the human relationship important for working with people disconnected from their homeland, family and much of the world.

Watenpaugh said he wants to take the Backpack to other areas of the Middle East most affected by the war in Syria. In the future, he sees its use for people affected by natural disasters, climate refugees and students with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, status in the United States.

Not long after returning from Lebanon, Watenpaugh was at the Sacramento Food Bank to enroll Afghan refugees who came to the Sacramento area with special visas for working with the military in Afghanistan.

The Backpack website is available to users in English and Arabic. By the end of 2018, it will be in Spanish, too.

Watenpaugh plans to integrate academic counseling and job placement assistance into the Backpack. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers is already developing a team to assess how the credentials that refugees share through the Backpack could be accepted by universities around the world.

At the Bekka Valley site, Watenpaugh finds Kaysaneyya fresh with disappointment that he didn't get a scholarship. But now that he's nearly done setting up his Backpack profile, he plans on using it to apply for future opportunities.

"Look, now you never have to worry about where your documents are," Watenpaugh tells Kaysaneyya. "That's one thing off your shoulders."

You've had a lot to worry about."

"I wish that it will change my life, actually," Kaysaneyya said of the Backpack. "I believe in that."

Provided by UC Davis

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