BRISMES
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BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom statement on restrictions on women's access to higher education in Syria

The BRISMES Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) is deeply concerned about the expansion of gender-based restrictions on access to programmes at Syria's newly established defence and security universities. These restrictions undermine equal access to higher education and students' freedom to pursue their academic interests and professional aspirations. We call for the removal of discriminatory admissions rules and for the protection of women's equal rights to education, intellectual development, and participation in academic life.

As documented by The Syria Report on 13 October and Human Rights Watch on 16 October, women are excluded from several programmes at the newly established National University for Defence Sciences (NUDS) and the Syrian University for Security Sciences (SUSS). At NUDS, these include legal sciences, social sciences, and administration and economics within the Faculty of Humanities and Administrative Sciences. At SUSS, women are excluded from the Faculty and Technical Institute of Security Sciences, although cybersecurity programmes remain open to them. Restrictions also apply to oil-and-gas technical institutes, the railway technical institute in Aleppo, and radio and television directing at Idlib University's technical media institute. These restrictions have different origins. The exclusion of women from the railway technical institute in Aleppo dates back to the Assad era, while restrictions at Idlib's technical media institute originated under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's administration of northwest Syria. In contrast, this year's admissions rules close oil-and-gas programmes previously open to women, alongside establishing exclusions at the two new defence and security universities.

Longstanding restrictions preventing men from entering certain care-related programmes also remain in place, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Nursing schools at Damascus and Aleppo universities, as well as kindergarten education programmes at public universities, admit only women. These restrictions on men's admission date back to the Assad era and continue under the current government.

The restrictions introduced by NUDS and SUSS do not constitute a nationwide ban on women studying the subjects concerned. However, the availability of similar programmes elsewhere does not mitigate their exclusion from particular institutions or the opportunities those institutions provide.

Academic freedom requires an educational environment in which students can pursue knowledge, develop their abilities, and participate in academic life without discrimination. Admissions decisions should rest on relevant, transparent criteria that assess applicants individually.

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These exclusions also appear to be inconsistent with the guarantees set out in Syria's Constitutional Declaration of 13 March 2025. Article 10 establishes equality before the law without discrimination on grounds including sex, while Article 21 expressly guarantees women's right to education and work and their social, economic and political rights. The Syrian authorities should give effect to these guarantees by ensuring that admissions policies provide equal opportunities and do not exclude applicants on the basis of gender.

The consequences of these restrictions extend beyond university admission. Where educational programmes provide routes into public employment, excluding women from university programmes also limits their participation in public institutions and in shaping Syria's future. Rebuilding the country's higher education system should expand opportunities for learning and participation, drawing on the abilities and aspirations of all students.

This position does not entail an endorsement of the expansion of state security institutions in the educational sector. Demanding equality does not make access to military and security structures the measure of women's emancipation, nor does opposition to gender discrimination entail support for the institutions from which women have been excluded. We defend the principle that women must not be denied educational opportunities because of their gender. We also affirm that universities should remain spaces for critical inquiry into the purposes, structures, and consequences of military and security power.

We call on the Syrian authorities, including the ministries of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Defence and Interior, to remove gender-based restrictions on university admission and ensure equal access to the programmes concerned. Applicants excluded by these rules should be given a meaningful opportunity to apply, including through reopened or extended application periods. We also call for a transparent review of admissions practices, with the participation of students, academic staff, and relevant civil society organisations, to ensure that they are fair to all students regardless of background or gender.

BRISMES CAF stands in solidarity with students and educators in Syria seeking an inclusive higher education system that upholds academic freedom, equal access, and the freedom to pursue education without discrimination.

Committee on Academic Freedom
British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES)
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