

Syrian uprising takes toll on scientific community

Already tiny science budget cut in favour of military spending.

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The civil unrest that erupted in Syria in March last year has left the country's scientific community in turmoil, researchers say.

Heavy cuts have been made to research budgets, and work at the majority of Syria's universities and research centres has ground to a halt.

Syria has four large universities with a strong science and technology focus. Three of these institutions — Al-Baath, Aleppo and Damascus — also have science or technology institutes attached. The most comprehensive science base in the country is at the University of Aleppo, where 65 per cent of the institution's faculties and 70 per cent of its attached institutes have a science focus.

"Scientific research was always on the sidelines of the Syrian government's concerns," Imad Ghalioun, a Syrian parliamentary member who fled the country to join the opposition, told *SciDev.Net*.

Even before the uprising began just over a year ago, Ghalioun said the government had allocated just 0.1 per cent (US\$57 million) of gross domestic product (GDP) to scientific research.

"After the revolution broke out, there was a dramatic cut in the science research budget to about 0.04 per cent of GDP — to the advantage of military expenditure," he said.

Mahmoud Haj Hamad, an inspector in the Ministry of Defense, has told *SciDev.Net* that many researchers are leaving Syria.

"The catastrophic situation experienced by various regions has led to the drain of scientific talents from Syria to the outside, and the deaths of a number of scientists in military actions," he said. "This will lead to a decline in the development of the Syrian society."

The situation has been particularly difficult for researchers at Al-Baath University, which is located in the city of Homs, the location of weeks of heavy clashes between the military and opposition supporters.

Ghassan, a professor at Al-Baath University who declined to give his surname due to the political sensitivities of speaking to the press, said: "Severe repression and military operations carried out by the regime [have cut access routes between major cities], so accessibility to universities and research centres [is very difficult] most of the time".

According to Ghassan, educational and research activities at Al-Baath University have been on hold for more than five months, and some of the university's buildings have been damaged by missiles.

Ramy, a student at Aleppo University who also withheld his last name, said: "Although Aleppo remains calmer than other cities, studying at the university has been partially disrupted because of demonstrations ... [and there are power cuts] for almost five hours a day".

In a statement to *SciDev.Net*, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), which is based in Aleppo, said: "the current situation in Syria has not affected the progress of ICARDA's global research program" but noted that "some of our work in certain parts of Syria has had to be reorganised".



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Syria's universities, including the University of Aleppo seen here, are being starved of funds during the country's popular uprising.

