As the flow of Syrians seeking refuge from their war-torn country turned into a flood, Science Careers spoke to a Syrian computer scientist who was able to reach Europe before it became overwhelmed with refugees in despair. She described her professional life before the war and her efforts to rebuild her career and ensure a future for her family. Her identity is undisclosed for security reasons. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: What was your career like before the conflict?
A: My career was evolving slowly because of the way the academic system was in Syria. It’s not that the system was discriminatory against women; it’s just that it was not helpful for most people. There was favoritism regarding access to resources, based on sectarian or political reasons. We were supposed to do research but didn’t have the means to do so.

Still, with perseverance, I fulfilled part of a dream. As a professor, I was not satisfied with the way Syrian students were being taught, and so I was trying to put in place a program to improve teaching at my university. But, in March 2011, just as the program was taking shape, the conflict started and everything else was stopped.

Q: How have you seen the conflict evolve?
A: At the beginning, my colleagues and I were freely discussing the pro-democracy protests and government response. However, within a few months, we started to see people getting arrested and tortured—including students on campus. So I stopped discussing my opinions openly.

Still, as the civil war took hold of the country, not risking your life became impossible. The year I left, just before the students’ final exams, there was a big explosion near my office. Had I been at work, I would have been killed. The next day, I had very few students in class, and I could see in their eyes how lost they felt. But, with time, people in Syria have realized they aren’t safe at home either, and students and professors keep going to universities.

Q: How did you leave Syria?
A: Back in 2012, it was still relatively easy, as the numbers of refugees sharply increased only later. My husband, children, and I first traveled to a neighboring country, where my husband moved his small business. It was going rather well, but we didn’t feel safe there in the long run.

To help my family get to a more secure country, I applied—to no avail—for any open university position I could find in the Gulf states. Then, one day on Facebook, I discovered a U.S. funding program for hosting threatened scholars, called the Institute of International Education’s Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF). I applied and got a fellowship. Meanwhile, my husband was able to obtain a work visa for Europe, and the rest of the family followed him. Nevertheless, it took me 10 months, and help from IIE-SRF and the Scholars at Risk Network, to finally secure a visiting position to take up my fellowship.

Q: What are your immediate aspirations?
A: I am planning to extend my 1-year fellowship to move to a new institution and expand my network, with the hope of securing a stable job in the end.

Meanwhile, I have also been trying to find opportunities in refugee education. Gaining access to universities in host countries is difficult for Syrian students because of money issues, language barriers, and laws. But we can imagine a lot of solutions and, with time, I think I will be able to make a contribution. And maybe then I will be not happy—it is impossible for us Syrians to feel happy as we hear about all the tragic events afflicting our people—but somewhat relieved.

Finally, I would like to raise awareness that Syrian professors can bring interesting backgrounds and great value to their host countries and institutions. They need opportunities to rebuild their personal and professional lives, as I am trying to do now.

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After the bombs
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