

The European Students' Union – ESU

Formerly known as ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe

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## Statement on the rights of students in Syria

To whom it may concern,

Syrian students have the right to pursue their higher education, to study in a safe environment where their rights are respected under any circumstances, and to be represented by student unions in a fair way.

Students in Syria have faced many challenges when pursuing higher education and have had to defend their rights for the past two years due to a war that has claimed more than 100 000 lives<sup>1</sup>. The unrest has forced many students to flee the country or to end abruptly their studies as universities no longer provided a safe environment for their students. Indeed, students have been targeted several times by the combating parties as several higher education institutions have been attacked, like the Aleppo University on January 15, 2013<sup>2</sup>. Attacking higher education institutions, the higher education system and students is a recurrent strategy during armed conflicts to harm the population and a generation that represents the future of the country. By acting so, the voice of the students who are the ones able to express strong opinions and find solutions is being silenced.

Moreover, higher education institutions no longer represent a safe environment because students and student representatives are subjects to external manipulations. This is what student representatives in Syria have reported to the European Students' Union. Indeed, some student representatives are taking sides in the conflict and using their status, connections and influence to fulfill political goals tracking down students (denouncing students, writing false reports about some students, physically harm students) who do not hold the same views about the current conflict. These behaviours underline the fact that times of conflict and tensions are times when students fight the hardest for their rights and need an independent student representation.

Students have the right to freely organise themselves, but this also has to follow democratic principles. ESU would like to emphasise that every student union must be autonomous and free

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23455760>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/middle-east-live/2013/jan/15/150-killed-in-bloody-day-in-syria-live-updates>

from external manipulations, especially from governments, must be run democratically and be open to every student in their countries. Therefore, ESU condemns those Syrian representatives that wrongly use their positions and decide to represent only a part of Syrian students. ESU also strongly affirms that students in Syria are part of the resolution of the conflict by playing their role of active citizens inside and outside higher education institutions, bringing highly positive changes in Syria in the future. However, this can only happen if students do not fear persecution, which is not currently the case in Syria.

These challenges force many students to quit their studies and sometimes flee the country. In this case, the future of those students and of the country is severely harmed. The European Students' Union pushes for finding solutions that allow students affected by the conflict to pursue their studies. The European Students Union supports the plans of foreign governments to put in place scholarship systems for Syrian students and to ensure that they enjoy the same rights in the host countries as national students and that they have necessary access to student support services.

Sincerely,

Elisabeth Gehrke,

Vice-chairperson of the  
European Students' Union  
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Maksim Milto,

Member of the Executive  
Committee of the European  
Students' Union 2013-2014

Gabriela Bergan,

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Brussels, 30 July 2013