

Centre for Syrian Studies receives increased funding at critical point in Syrian history

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The University of St Andrews' Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS), set up in 2006, is to have three years of increased funding, namely an extra sum of £322,000, spread over three years, from the Asfari Foundation.

This increase has been announced at a time when anti-governmental protests and extremely violent responses from the Bashar al-Assad regime have left Syria on the brink of civil war.

The neutrality of the CSS' research has been questioned in the past. In 2011, the University's online news refuted accusations from *The Guardian*, which questioned the neutrality of the funds given. Following an internal review, where the University team found "no evidence" that the centre's research outcomes had been prejudiced or that its links to a cross-section of Syrian interests were inappropriate," *The Guardian* published a formal apology on its website. This stated: "We accept that the donations to the Centre for Syrian Studies...did not compromise or cause embarrassment to those organisations. We apologise to Mr Asfari".

In its Mission Statement, the CSS says that it aims to: "foster scholarship and dialogue about Syria and exchanges between Syrian and British scholars and others," and to "undertake research on contemporary Syria, specifically, on economic and political reform in Syria and foreign policy issues concerning Syria."

The increased funding will therefore allow more students to begin research in the upcoming academic year of 2012-2013.

Additionally, students will be able to carry out specialised research regarding the ongoing Syrian crisis. As Professor Raymond Hinnebusch, Director of the CSS, said recently to the *St Andrews Citizen*: "We hope that a better understanding of Syria will... help policy-makers, the media and the international aid community to make more informed decisions and judgments."

In 2011, research being undertaken by PhD students focused upon Turkish-Syrian relations and the state's improving relations with Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs).

In a conference held by the Centre in September, 2011, research pointed to the Assad regime encouraging the growth of the charity sector, if only in order to decrease its responsibilities in providing welfare services for Syrians.

The research completed throughout 2012 is set to look very different.

In view of the recent uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, emphasis will be placed upon the likelihood of a Syrian democracy coming to fruition.

As Mr Asfari, a Syrian-born British businessman, told the *St Andrews Citizen*: “The appalling situation in Syria is of the greatest concern to the Foundation. Syria is on the brink of great change. For the country to make the transition to a more democratic and just society under the rule of law, much work needs to be done, both inside Syria and abroad.”

With a United Nations Observer Mission due to be deployed imminently, and Kofi Annan’s six-point peace plan thus far being disregarded by President Assad, Mr Asfari’s increased funding to the CSS comes at a critical time in Syrian history.