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School Curricula in Syria: Hidden Victim of the Conflict or Weapon of War?

Evidence shows that school curricula in regime-held and opposition-held areas are highly politicised and contribute to social fragmentation rather than social cohesion.

Among the many sectors destroyed by the thirteen-year Syrian conflict, education has suffered enormous losses and garnered the attention of funders, development agencies and academics alike. Marked by decades of authoritarian ruled, Syrian education – school buildings, staff and students – was caught in conflict and instrumentalised by warring actors. At the same time, education was used as a vehicle for resistance and resilience by activists and academics, and a tool for social change. In other words, Syrian education has many faces.

This research offers a unique comparative study on primary and secondary school curricula in opposition-held and regime-held Syrian schools since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. This policy brief highlights some of the key findings of this study, with the aim of informing policymakers, funders, and peacebuilders on opportunities to use education as a tool for peace in Syria.

KEY FINDINGS

. School curricula are **highly politicized** by the two governments and largely reinforce intra-Syrian divisions. The manipulation of education prioritises power consolidation and political rehabilitation over social cohesion and reconciliation.

. The vacuum of power left by the conflict led to the **privatization of education** in both areas, creating opportunities for alternative narratives but also potentially promoting divisions within the education system.

. External actors, mainly Russia and Turkey, use formal and informal education as a tool for power in Syria. This **external influence** further exacerbates the fragmentation of education and hinders social cohesion.

. There is an **urgent need for educational reforms** that prioritize peace-building efforts, involve diverse stakeholders, and foster inclusivity to overcome the deep-rooted divisions in Syrian society.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND PEACE MAKERS

• **Facilitate dialogue and collaboration** – Promote knowledge exchange between different stakeholders in the education sector to promote understanding, reconciliation, and unity (within and across areas of governance).

• **Establish partnerships and support a multi-actor approach** – Educational programmes and policies require a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Encourage partnership between international organisations, local and civil society organisations, and educational institutions to ensure the sustainable impact of educational programmes and policies.

• **Support inclusive curriculum development** – Education can be used as a tool of divisions or as a tool for social cohesion and critical thinking. Increased funding and support are required to promote include and peace-oriented curricula in Syria.

• **Provide training and resources on peace education**: **Provide training and resources on peace education**: Allocate resources for teacher training programs focused on peace education, conflict resolution, and inclusive teaching practices to effectively implement the new curricula. Such training must be context and conflict sensitive. Build the skills of students and community members involved in the education process on issues of conflict resolution and intercultural communication.

• **Engage with local communities**: Local communities must be involved in the decision-making process on educational policies and practices to ensure that they are inclusive and representative of diverse voices. The content of school curricula must be culturally sensitive and relevant to the needs of the students and their families.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT

• **Promote inclusive curricula** – Encourage public and private schools to revise the school curricula to promote inclusivity, reconciliation, and social cohesion by incorporating diverse perspectives and histories, including those by other areas of control in Syria.

• **Enhance educators training**: Collaborate with local and international organisations to provide training for teachers on conflict resolution strategies and inclusive teaching methods to create a more peaceful learning environment.

• **Support peace education** – Advocate for the implementation of peace education programs within schools to teach conflict resolution skills, tolerance, and understanding of different cultures. Such programs could be implemented through sports and creative arts.

• **Engage with international partners**: Collaborate with international funders and organisations to support initiatives that focus on reconciliation and social cohesion within the education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT

• **Shift narrative** – Move away from the narrative disseminated in schoolbooks to focus on the recognition of Syria's diversity and need of inclusivity to build a united Syria.

• **Unify curricula** – Start a process of unification of school curricula across Syria and all areas of control to promote a sense of national unity and cohesion. Unified curricula should be inclusive and acknowledge the role of all types of figures – regardless of ethnicity, religion and ideology – in the shaping of the Syrian nation.

• **Strengthen social cohesion**: Use education to promote social cohesion across Syria. Such initiatives could be implemented through sports and creative arts and should aim to bring together Syrian students from diverse backgrounds and ideologies. This can also include exchange programs with students from countries in the Middle East region.

• **Engage with international partners**: Lessen the regulations on the access of international organisations to Syrian populations. These partners have a crucial role to play in the reconstruction of the country, including the educational sector, and the promotion of a peaceful post-conflict Syria.

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THE RESEARCH

This research compares the cases of primary and secondary education in areas held by i/ the Syrian regime and, ii/ the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in the northwest of the country.

A total of 40 interviews — 20 in each governance area – were conducted with teachers, educational supervisors, curriculum developers, and families of students. All interviews were conducted by the authors (in person in opposition-held areas and via phone in regime-held areas due to security reasons) between October 2022 and July 2023. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the drafting process of school curricula, especially the motivations and constraints behind this process. Interviews also provided reflections on some of the Syrians' perceptions and experiences of navigating education before and during the conflict.

The research also builds on an inductive content analysis of official school curricula of grades 1 to 12 (from the beginning of primary to the end of high school) published between 2011 and 2022. The analysis included several textbooks to provide a comprehensive picture of Syrian education, with a focus on Arabic Language, Arabic Literature, Christian Education, Geography, History, Islamic Education, and Nationalism. The texts of all curricula were compared via a software to single out potential modifications brought to textbooks each year in relation to the evolution of conflict dynamics. This aimed to uncover potential narratives – or the lack thereof – prone to either fuel conflict or promote peace among Syrians.

Finally, the analysis builds on the first-hand experience of one of the authors who was a student under Hafez al-Assad, a schoolteacher for various grades under Bashar al-Assad and an education activist in SIG-held areas where she was displaced by the conflict. This third lens of analysis was used to explore the interactions between education, peace and conflict in Syria since the early 1990s until today.

FINDINGS

In regime-held areas, school curricula were reformed under heavy political supervision

The Syrian regime corresponds daily with schools, especially in times of crisis, to control the narrative disseminated to students. It used this tied control to frame the 2011 protests as a conspiracy of the West and Israel against Syria. The regime also initiated the amendment of curricula to remove mentions of neighbouring states who supported the opposition and supposedly aligned with the colonial West, such as Qatar and Turkey. The regime also removed all mentions of revolutionary ideas, especially in Arabic Literature textbooks. These amendments took place under heavy political supervision in the authorship committee of the Syrian Ministry of Education. Several committee members described the poor ethical standards of the curricula development process. For instance, members were encouraged to rely on 'copy and paste' from other countries' curricula.

The Syrian regime used school curricula to redefine the country, its history and loyalties

Curricula reforms in regime-held areas saw the addition of Russian as a foreign language alongside English in 2013/2014. More transformations occurred in religious education, where religious lessons were replaced with lessons on morals and ethics, in line with the secularism of Bashar al-Assad's state project. This change can also be interpreted as a step for al-Assad to take some distance from Islam and fits the official narrative that the Syrian regime's use of violence during the conflict only aimed at fighting terrorist Islamists. The Syrian regime also used education to redraw national borders, as the Turkish area of Alexandretta of Sanjak was reintegrated into Syria in all schoolbooks published after 2012–2013. Similarly, the focus of history schoolbooks shifted to the ancient history of Syria, thereby erasing centuries of modern history. This move reflects the regime's distancing from its Arab and Islamic neighbours whom it considers traitors since they

sided with the opposition and regime change in the first years of the crisis.

In SIG-held areas, the production of school curricula was contested

After the establishment of the SIG in September 2013, the Ministry of Education centralised the process of modification of school curricula. Instead of creating new curricula from scratch, opposition institutions used and modified the curricula taught in regime-held areas. This process was however hampered by the lack of resources to print new books. The subject of Nationalism was cancelled, like the glorification of Assad.

During the same period, opposition-held areas witnessed the development of a religious movement under the impulse of armed (sometimes radical) Islamic factions. These factions exploited the interruption of the educational process to establish religious institutes and develop their own curricula. These institutes were also used as recruitment agencies, as the vast number of students would soon join the ranks of the armed group in charge of their education.

The defeat of these groups and the relative inactivation of the conflict in 2017-2020 gave the SIG and its affiliated local council the opportunity to reaffirm their authority and control over the educational file. But their inability to provide an effective alternative to the Syrian regime allowed Turkey to play an increasingly important role in education. Turkey is the guarantor of the peace process on the side of the Syrian opposition.

In SIG-held areas, political fragmentation is the biggest challenge to the development of a unified education system

Since the start of the academic year 2018/2019, Syrian students in SIG-controlled areas can choose to study either for a secondary certificate issued by the SIG or for one issued by the local councils affiliated with the Turkish Directorate of Education. Each certificate relies on different final

Exam and making schemes. Syrian students base their choice on the university they hope to join, since all universities in opposition-held areas do not accept the Turkish diploma.

Turkish was added as a second compulsory language in 2018/2019 in Syrian schools that prepare students for the Turkish diploma. Also, a number of religious institutes were established; they are affiliated with Syrian local councils that cultivate strong ties with the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs. They aim to promote an alternative Islam in the face of the radical Islamist factions that mushroomed during the conflict. This revival of religious literacy is also encouraged by the SIG and Religious Education textbooks have been expanded to the study of Coran.

The vacuum of power left by the conflict led to the privatization of education in both area

The pace of educational reform has been even faster in non-formal institutions in regime-controlled areas. Non-formal education became an opportunity for Russia and Iran to spread their influence in the cultural, social and political realms. Russian cultural centres and Shia *hawzat* have mushroomed and were used to disseminate sectarian and exclusionary discourses.

While such discourses are no longer disseminated in SIG-held areas, cultural centers contribute to the continuous reinforcement of Turkish culture (so do secondary schools teaching the Turkish diploma). This is visible through the replacement of Syria's Islamic history with an exclusive focus on the history of the Ottoman Empire.

COMPARISON

Regime and opposition-held areas witnessed similar developments during the thirteen years of the Syrian conflict.

. Each government used education to promote its official narrative about the conflict, the country, and the region. This manipulation includes the modes of delivery of knowledge.

. Each government uses education to reshape the identity of Syrian student. While the SIG encourages pupils to reclaim their common religious heritage, the Syrian regime takes a strong non-Arab, non-Muslim stance. Hate curricula, however, are only prominent in regime-held areas. Early in the conflict, this narrative incorporated stereotypical images of the 'others', and a 'good Syria' versus 'evil opposition and their supporters' terminology to promote the idea of an impossible coexistence. As time passed, polarisation made way to a politics of erasure; the perceived enemies of the Syrian state – and their affiliated identities – lost their special status to disappear from the schoolbooks, maps, and minds.

. Each government saw their power contested through the rise of private education and the involvement of external state actors, mainly Turkey and Russia. On the one hand, the manipulation of the school curricula and the education system by internal and external actors is major contributor to social divisions in conflict-ridden countries. On the other, multiplication of narratives might provide alternative perspectives that students will use to develop self and relational consciousness.

. In each area and across Syria, the fragmentation of governance and the education sector holds the seeds for future conflicts. The academic disparity between and within the different regions might create a generation of Syrians who do not understand and judge each other.

MORE ABOUT THE RESEARCH

❋ Al Sakbani, N. and Beaujouan, J. (2024). 'Education in Syria: hidden victim of the conflict or weapon of war?', *Journal of Peace Education* [Link].

❋ Beaujouan, J. (2022). *The Rise of Private Education in Northwest Syria* (Policy Brief). PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform [Link].

MORE ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nisreen Al Sakbany is a Syrian teacher and trainer, and an activist in the field of education. She specialises in teaching English to non-native students and has expertise in curriculum development. Nisreen believes that education is the most important tool for achieving change and community cohesion. Besides her work as an educator, she researches social dynamics in northwest Syria.

Juline Beaujouan is a Post-doctoral Research Fellow with PeaceRep, based at the University of Edinburgh. She is a passionate researcher and educator with transdisciplinary experience in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies. Juline has expertise in non-state armed actors, political Islam, violent extremism, and conflict management, and a keen interest in collaborative and responsible research practices. She combines academic expertise with evidence-based policymaking and community inclusion and engagement, which she developed over nine years of field experience across Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

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Acknowledgements

About Us

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

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