

BRIEF

Dynamics of Exclusion and Violence in Education and Their Effect on Peacebuilding in Syria

A study conducted by Duderî e.V
in partnership with EuroMed Feminist Initiative

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Introduction and Research Question

This study presents how the dynamics of exclusion and violence have interplayed with education in three regions of Syria falling under different authorities, namely, As-Sweida (under the authority of the Syrian regime), Al-Raqqa (under the authority of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) and Idlib (under the authority of Tahrir Al-Sham Organisation – HTS). The study explores how the curriculum in each of these regions of Syria is shaped by their incumbent authorities, unveiling how this subsequently affects students and the society's understanding of exclusion and violence based on gender, race, ethnicity, and religion.

The central focus of this study lies in the intricate interplay between the current educational system and peacebuilding. It seeks to unveil the inherent challenge that peacebuilding initiatives face when the educational system incorporates or perpetuates elements such as violence, discrimination, propaganda, a lack of inclusion, and a lack in gender sensitivity. These elements are not merely isolated concerns; rather, they represent a collective impediment to the cultivation of a society built upon the principles of peace, equality, justice, and inclusion. By dissecting and analysing the impact of these components within the educational framework, this study aspires to shed light on the critical role of education in either fostering or obstructing the path to lasting peace and social cohesion. Furthermore, it aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to align the educational system with the broader goals of peace and conflict resolution.

Methodology

The study spanned three months from May to July and focused on As-Sweida, Al-Raqqa, and Idlib. Researchers used interviews, focus groups, and surveys, engaging three participant groups: students (13-17 years old, 7 female and 3 male students in Al-Raqqa, 5 female and 5 male students in both Idlib and As-Sweida), teaching professionals (6 female and 4 male in both Idlib and As-Sweida and 4 female and 6 male in Al-Raqqa), and civil society actors (5 female and 5 men in As-Sweida and Idlib, 4 female and 6 male in Al-Raqqa). Each region had 30 participants in focus group discussions (10 from each category), with a total of 15 in-depth interviews (in each region) and 100 parent surveys per region. Additionally, desk research has been conducted by the team, to complement the theoretical analysis and to build on the existing and available research studies on the region.

Main findings

I. Violence in the educational system

Violence within the educational system has profound negative impacts on students across these regions, experiencing a military-style approach to education that stifles questioning, enforces traditional gender roles, ignores mental health and traumatic experiences, and fosters discrimination.

As-Sweida:

Violence within the educational system significantly impacts students, drawing parallels to military-style education. This manifests in restrictions against questioning authority, promoting traditional gender roles and discrimination, often leading to punitive measures. Notably, 78% of surveyed parents find such punishments ineffective, while 18% believe they serve as a form of discipline.

The violence and discrimination students experience, both in their educational and broader life contexts, have adverse effects on their well-being and educational progress. A striking 79% of parents highlight that their children grapple with depression, a situation reflected in As-Sweida's alarming suicide rates, averaging 23 cases annually. In the survey, 41% of respondents expressed the view that the educational curricula inadequately incorporate subjects and theoretical concepts that discourage violence. In addition, the curricula neglect to address the emotional toll inflicted upon students due to their traumas and experiences in time of conflict and its gender dimensions.

Despite the repeated changes to the curricula, made on two occasions and then three, students remain confronted with fundamental contradictions emerging between the curricula's idealistic concepts, such as entrepreneurship and democracy, and the daily violence students confront in their region. Moreover, these changes failed to consider the students' living conditions and the hardships they endure, including the loss of loved ones, forced displacement, violence, killings, detention, and forced disappearances.

Al-Raqqa:

The focus group discussions shed the light on the violence experienced by the students in attending schools run by the Autonomous Administration. This violence is deeply ingrained within the education system established by Hafez al-Assad and is viewed as an extension of the Syrian

regime's hierarchical and patriarchal nature. Inspired by military education, reported violent practices range from enforcing strict dress codes and hairstyles to publicly shaming female students for wearing makeup and employing coercive control and physical abuse by teachers. The gender aspect of this violence is evident, with female students enduring invasive inspections and being prohibited from even smiling during school hours. The military-style discipline inherited from the Syrian regime negatively affects the relationship between parents and educational institutions. Parents report that teachers use obscene language and mistreat students, leading to clear cases of bullying. Violence is one of the several factors pushing parents and students to prefer studying the curriculum of the Ministry of Education from the Syrian regime in private institutions.

Regarding mental health, a staggering 57% of students report experiencing depression due to the overall state of the educational system. This underscores the system's neglect of students' mental health and trauma and emphasizes the pressing need for a comprehensive educational reform that prioritizes students' mental well-being, including from a gender perspective, directly impacting their academic success and overall quality of life.

Idlib:

The region of Idlib faces a unique challenge from the other analysed regions: the constant exposure to bombardments, with most students having experienced violence since the early stages of the conflict at just 5 years old. Within the classrooms, a concerning aspect of this education system is the reliance on group punishments, where all students are penalized for one student's mistake. This practice creates a hostile environment, erodes the student-teacher relationship, and reinforces the belief that punishment is inevitable, potentially leading to more rule violations. Both physical and psychological violence are observed, taking a toll on students' mental health. Parents recognize the negative impact, with 65% viewing this violence as detrimental to their children's learning.

The cycle of violence perpetuates itself in society, resulting in high rates of bullying and a significant 72% of students experiencing depression due to their school experiences in Idlib. Surprisingly, 80% of surveyed parents don't see violence (including gender-based violence) integrated into the curriculum, highlighting the perception over the normalization of violence in society. It's crucial to consider the looming humanitarian crisis in Idlib as a contributing factor to the high levels of depression and the acceptance of violence within this context.

II. Discrimination and lack of inclusion

In all three regions, the educational curriculum fails to address the ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of Syrian society. The focus remains largely on Arab identity and does not provide any in-depth discussions about various ethnicities, which directly impacts the perspective that students have on ethnicity and their vision of diversity.

As- Sweida:

The updated National Education book attempts to address the prior omission of religious and ethnic diversity discussions within Syrian society, presenting it as diverse and multifaceted. Nevertheless, it maintains a stereotype of a unified Arab identity. This is evident in how “diversity” is mentioned six times in the curriculum but lacks specific details about various ethnicities like Kurds, Assyrians, and Turkmen. The curriculum, while addressing national identity, fails to provide a clear definition of “citizen” while consistently using masculine terms. It emphasizes transcending subordinate identities that may weaken the overarching national identity, asserting that affiliation with a religious or ethnic group threatens this collective identity symbolized by the armed forces and the leader.

Despite these limitations, there’s a strong societal desire for more inclusive education in As-Sweida where 90% of the population is Druze. A substantial 71% of respondents believe the curriculum should incorporate comprehensive content on Syria’s cultural diversity, including in-depth discussions of ethnic and national variations. Additionally, a notable 88% advocate for curricula free from religious influences.

Al Raqqa:

On the one hand, for students learning the curriculum from the Syrian regime, the National Education textbook for the ninth grade, published by the Syrian regime (2012/2013 edition), promotes Arab nationalism, and emphasizes an Arab identity, sidelining the country’s ethnic and religious diversity. The History textbook aligns with this ideology, neglecting the region’s distinguished role in History (e.g. during the Treaty of Sèvres and the Paris Peace Conference), thereby marginalizing the area from the national narrative. Moreover, language plays a divisive role, with the Arabic language presented as the primary element of belonging, marginalizing other languages spoken in Syria.

On the other hand, for students learning in schools run by the Autonomous Administration, Kurdish language imposition led to polarization and discrimination between students of Arab and Kurdish backgrounds. The curriculum discusses religious diversity, but primarily focuses on the Islamic-Christian dimension, with limited recognition of Syria's broader religious pluralism.

Idlib:

The revised HTS curriculum contributes to a collective 'amnesia' within society by selectively omitting historical facts concerning certain minorities. For instance, significant figures like the Alawite Sheikh Saleh Ali, who played a crucial role in the fight against French colonialists, have been entirely eradicated from the textbooks. Notably, Sheikh Saleh Ali shares the same religious sect as the current President, Bashar al-Assad, whose educational curricula have also been criticized for distorting historical facts in favour of their religious sect. Another concerning omission is the erasure of Hezbollah's role in the 2006 war in Syria, seemingly a response to their violent actions against the Syrian population during the conflict, potentially indicating discrimination against a particular sect.

This exclusionary approach in the curriculum has led to a return to antiquated ideologies that fail to include other religions outside of Islam. Interviews with students reflect this influence, with some expressing the need to guide those from different religions toward the 'right path'. Additionally, there are statements suggesting conditional coexistence with non-Muslims, contingent on the payment of 'Diyah' or compensation money. These opinions underscore the extent to which the HTS curriculum has succeeded in instilling its ideology in young students in Idlib.

Similarly, the school curriculum in Idlib exhibits a distinct lack of discussion regarding the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Syrian population, largely focusing on the Arab majority. This was evident when students in a focus group were asked about Nowruz, a cultural celebration relevant to the neighbouring Kurdish-majority region of Afrin. Shockingly, six out of ten students had no knowledge of Nowruz, highlighting the authorities' disregard for the inclusion of the diverse stories of various Syrian ethnicities within the curriculum.

III. Education as a tool of propaganda

In all analysed regions, education serves as a tool for propaganda and the promotion of specific ideological narratives, reflecting the political authority or controlling group's interests. The curriculum serves to reinforce loyalty to the ruling parties or authorities. It emphasises the portrayal of the current leader as a national symbol and saviour of the State, while attributing the nation's challenges to external agendas. The main difference lies in who controls the narrative, and who dictates on how the historical events are being interpreted or on how a cult of personality around a certain leader is being presented.

As-Sweida:

Education is used as a propaganda tool in Syria, with organisations like the Revolutionary Youth Union and The Ba'ath Pioneers reinforcing Ba'athist principles in the curriculum. For years, students were subjected to ideological indoctrination, emphasising loyalty to the Ba'ath Party. However, in 2020, a curriculum update focused more on the diversity of Syrian society, national unity, and territory integrity. The leadership narrative highlights the legendary steadfastness of the leader, inherited from his father, while drawing parallels between historical events and contemporary issues to link national identity, the national flag, and the army to Bashar Al-Assad, portraying his survival as vital for Syria's survival.

The depiction of leadership is carefully crafted to present the leader as a national symbol and saviour of the State, while the curriculum implies that Syria's current challenges are due to external agendas. This approach undermines critical thinking and independent thought, portraying national identity as loyalty to the authorities, which contradicts the democratic and civil society concepts taught in the same curricula. The pattern of propaganda is evident in the curriculum, and 90% of parents advocate for a separation of curricula from the political interests of the ruling party.

Al Raqqa:

The National Education book defines national belonging as a bond that transcends tribal affiliations and participation in national occasions, implying that those who protested in 2011, adopted the independence flag, and rejected the regime's national anthem are excluded from the national identity.

The book presents President Bashar Al-Assad as having reclaimed occupied Arab lands,

strengthening international relations, fostering development, and boosting the economy. It highlights unity during foreign pressures in 2011 and support for the leader during the crisis.

Idlib:

Numerous alterations have been made to the curriculum in Idlib to align it with the prevailing ideology of the authorities. For instance, the Golan Heights, which was previously referred to as “stolen” in the regime’s curriculum, is now depicted as having been “sold” by the regime. There is also a noticeable distinction in the portrayal of leadership changes, with Gamal Abdul Nasser’s rise to power labelled as a “coup,” while Saddam Hussein’s ascent is described simply as him “taking over” the rule. It becomes evident that the HTS-curated curriculum aims to reinterpret historical events selectively and establish a cult of personality around specific leaders in accordance with its own ideological perspective.

Notably, the cult of Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, the leader of HTS, receives limited emphasis in these educational materials. This could be attributed to the fact that these textbooks were produced before his rise to power, with Turkey primarily responsible for their production. Meanwhile, al-Jawlani pursued the consolidation of his rule through religious worship and clandestine activities. This shift in focus underscores a transition from the veneration of the individual to that of the state within this educational framework.

IV. Gender equality and gender sensitivity in the curriculum

In all analysed regions, the education system fails to include adequately gender equality and the roles of women in society. The curriculum lacks proper representation of women and perpetuates gender-based discrimination. This is exacerbated by practices like gender segregation within classrooms and warnings against harassment, targeted to female students. During the conducted surveys, parents express concerns about gender-based discrimination, specific instances of harassment, and inadequate attention to gender-related issues within the educational framework.

As-Sweida:

The National Education books inadequately address women’s roles and gender equality, mentioning “women” only ten times and “Syrian women” just once. This lack of representation in the curriculum perpetuates social norms rooted in gender-based discrimination, reflected

in practices like segregating the sexes within the classroom. Female students receive warnings against potential harassment, while male students receive no corresponding guidance.

Parents have expressed concerns about gender-based discrimination in the education system, with 36% believing that certain subjects in the curricula contribute to reinforcing such discrimination, and 26% perceiving some level of perpetuation. A substantial 43% of parents are aware of specific instances of gender-based harassment within schools, highlighting the urgent need to address gender-related issues in education.

Al-Raqqa:

In the History curriculum of the Syrian regime, women are primarily portrayed as auxiliary to men, with a limited mention of notable figures such as Nazik al-Abed and the women of the Latakia Mountains' resistance movement. However, it neglects the contributions of Syrian women in other regions and their broader struggle against the French mandate and feminist movements in Syrian history.

Regarding sexual harassment, 58% of parents in the survey reported knowledge of instances within schools. Strikingly, 73% of these parents opposed the inclusion of sexual education subjects in official curricula, reflecting a tension between recognizing the issue and apprehension about introducing comprehensive sexual education due to religious and cultural considerations.

Idlib:

The curriculum has undergone significant alterations that effectively exclude female perspectives from the learning experience. A conspicuous example of this is the complete removal of female pronouns in the curriculum's books under the pretext of teaching Arabic eloquence (Balagha). Moreover, the curriculum makes virtually no mention of any historical female figures, except for Lala Fatima Nasoumar, the renowned Algerian resistance fighter recognised for her battle against the French in Algeria. This approach closely resembles the Baathist educational curriculum, which consistently framed women within patriarchal contexts.

Furthermore, HTS actively enforces gender roles through measures such as segregating boys and girls in schools and imposing strict limits on the number of girls allowed in a classroom, with a mandatory requirement of 15 girls for a class to be opened, a restriction not applied to boys. As a result, girls in certain regions may be denied access to education unless they can find additional

female classmates to meet this quota. Surprisingly, the focus group discussions revealed that students in Idlib perceive this gender segregation as a natural and vital aspect of their education, believed to enhance their focus and align with societal values. This perception may be rooted in the prolonged impacts of war, poverty, and the influence of social media, which have contributed to reinforcing these values within Idlib society. Additionally, the curriculum inadvertently implies that girls can be a distraction, further perpetuating this philosophy.

The philosophy of teaching also extends to the educators themselves, with female teachers in Idlib being required to be managed by other female teachers. Unfortunately, women teachers do not receive the same level of support as their male counterparts, particularly in teaching scientific subjects within girls' schools. This gender-segregated educational system reflects and perpetuates traditional gender roles and biases, limiting opportunities for female students and educators alike.

V. Role of civil society organisations

The role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is constrained in As-Sweida and Idlib due to the tight control from authorities. In Al-Raqqa, many have been working in the education sector since the 2017. However, in all three regions, the potential for civil society to contribute in developing the curriculum and shaping the educational environment is not realised.

As-Sweida:

The role of CSOs in As-Sweida remains significantly constrained due to the region's government control. This circumstance renders it nearly impossible for these organisations to engage in lobbying efforts, offer recommendations, or provide support for alternative curricula. The tightly controlled environment limits the space for civil society to operate independently and advocate for educational reforms or community initiatives. As a result, the potential for civil society to actively contribute to the development and improvement of the educational system in As-Sweida is greatly restricted, highlighting the challenges faced by those striving to effect positive change in the region's educational landscape.

Al-Raqqa:

After Al-Raqqa's liberation in 2017, numerous local CSOs emerged to aid school restoration, rehabilitation, and psychological support for people with disabilities. They also focused on ensuring

universal accessibility in school rehabilitation and reintegrating drop-out children. However, these efforts were limited in scope and duration and lacked consistent quality standards. Consequently, disparities arose among schools in the same city, leading to competition for enticing teacher salaries, impacting schools administered by the Autonomous Administration. Furthermore, CSO-supported schools are often seen as reliant on external aid and lacking sustainability.

Idlib:

The role of civil society organisations in Idlib remains very hard to quantify. Due to the fragmented governance and the de facto control of various armed groups, including HTS, it is very hard for civil society actors to interfere with the curriculum. The strong influence of religious and ideological components entrenched in the curriculum, along with societal acceptance of certain practices, makes it harder for CSOs to have a real impact on the curriculum and its potential modifications.

Recommendations

Curriculum, educational approach and well-being:

1. *Revising Curricula for Gender Equality:* A comprehensive re-evaluation of the educational curriculum from a gender perspective is essential to promote equality, citizenship, and pluralism in the educational system.

2. *Development-Oriented Education:* Identify and address the lack of educational plans tailored to the reconstruction needs of Syria, including vocational education programmes, which are crucial for the country's development.

3. *Curriculum Independence:* Ensure the complete independence of educational curricula from any political or religious influence, with a focus on respecting religious, linguistic, and belief diversity. Promote ethics as a central subject, linking it to democracy, citizenship, and the social contract, with the goal of instilling these values in the new generation and ensuring their incorporation in the future Syrian constitution.

4. *Curriculum Development Team:* Establish a team of academically qualified experts to oversee the development of educational curricula, ensuring that the team is politically independent and possesses the necessary scientific knowledge and expertise.

5. Mental health and psychosocial support: Provide school-based mental health and psychosocial support to address the mental health issues experienced by the students, the teachers and the educational community, through promotion, prevention and response programmes.

6. Educational Workshops: Organise workshops for educational sector workers in Syria, providing insights into international experiences in post-conflict education.

Coordination, Support and Infrastructure:

7. Coordination Among Educational Organisations: Foster cooperation and coordination among education-focused associations and organisations to ensure strategic and sustainable interventions.

8. Reintegration Programmes: Develop specialised programmes to support the reintegration of students who have dropped out of school, offering them opportunities to continue their education within various educational organisations.

9. Classroom Equipment: Equip classrooms with the necessary resources and materials to enable teachers to deliver quality education, free from indoctrination.

10. Teacher Training: Encourage continuous professional development for educators and education administrators by offering training courses to enhance their skills, while restricting teaching positions to those who are academically qualified.

11. Infrastructure and Human Capital: Enhance the quantity and quality of educational infrastructure while providing professional development opportunities for educators, enabling them to implement modern teaching methods.

Diversity and International Engagement:

12. Multilingual Education: Ensure that all schools in Syria have the capability to offer education in multiple languages, including Kurdish, Syriac, and others, to reflect the linguistic diversity within the country.

13. International Engagement: Establish communication channels with international bodies engaged in negotiations with de facto authorities to resolve the issue of recognizing preparatory and secondary school certificates, which should not be exploited for political purposes to the

detriment of students, families, and educational institutions. To achieve sustainable development, justice, stability, and the rule of law, Syria must undergo significant political and educational reforms. To foster a transition from a generation marked by conflict and dominance to one characterized by education, development, creativity, and excellence, these actions are crucial.

Political and Constitutional Reforms:

14. *Political Transition:* Restructure the current political authority, dismantling organisations that have no role in the educational process and reconfigure the education system to prioritize specialisation and competence as part of the broader political transition.

15. *Gender Equality and Equal Citizenship:* Develop a new constitution that explicitly supports gender equality and legislation that safeguards equal citizenship and equal rights for people of all genders, religions, and ethnicities.

Conclusions

The central focus of this study revolves around the complex relationship between the current educational system and the broader goal of peacebuilding, as well as the intricate interplay between education and dynamics of exclusion and violence in three distinct regions of Syria under different authorities: As-Sweida (under the Syrian regime), Al-Raqqa (under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria), and Idlib (under the HTS).

The examination of education amid war and conflict revealed the use of curricula in Al-Raqqa, As-Sweida, and Idlib as political tools by local authorities. The study emphasized the entwined relationship between politics and education, as these curricula perpetuated violence, gender bias, and ethnic discrimination.

The study found that the impact of these curricula was both direct and indirect due to the complex educational landscape shaped by prolonged violence and damaged infrastructure. Gender stereotypes, particularly in Idlib, hindered girls' access to education, leading to marginalization based on gender, ethnicity, and religion.

Despite variations in the challenges faced in each region, including economic crises, and differing curricular issues, they all contributed to the discrimination of minority groups. This, in turn, led to

a new generation of Syrians with a diminished connection to Syria's cultural diversity, hindering the prospects for peace and justice in the country.

