



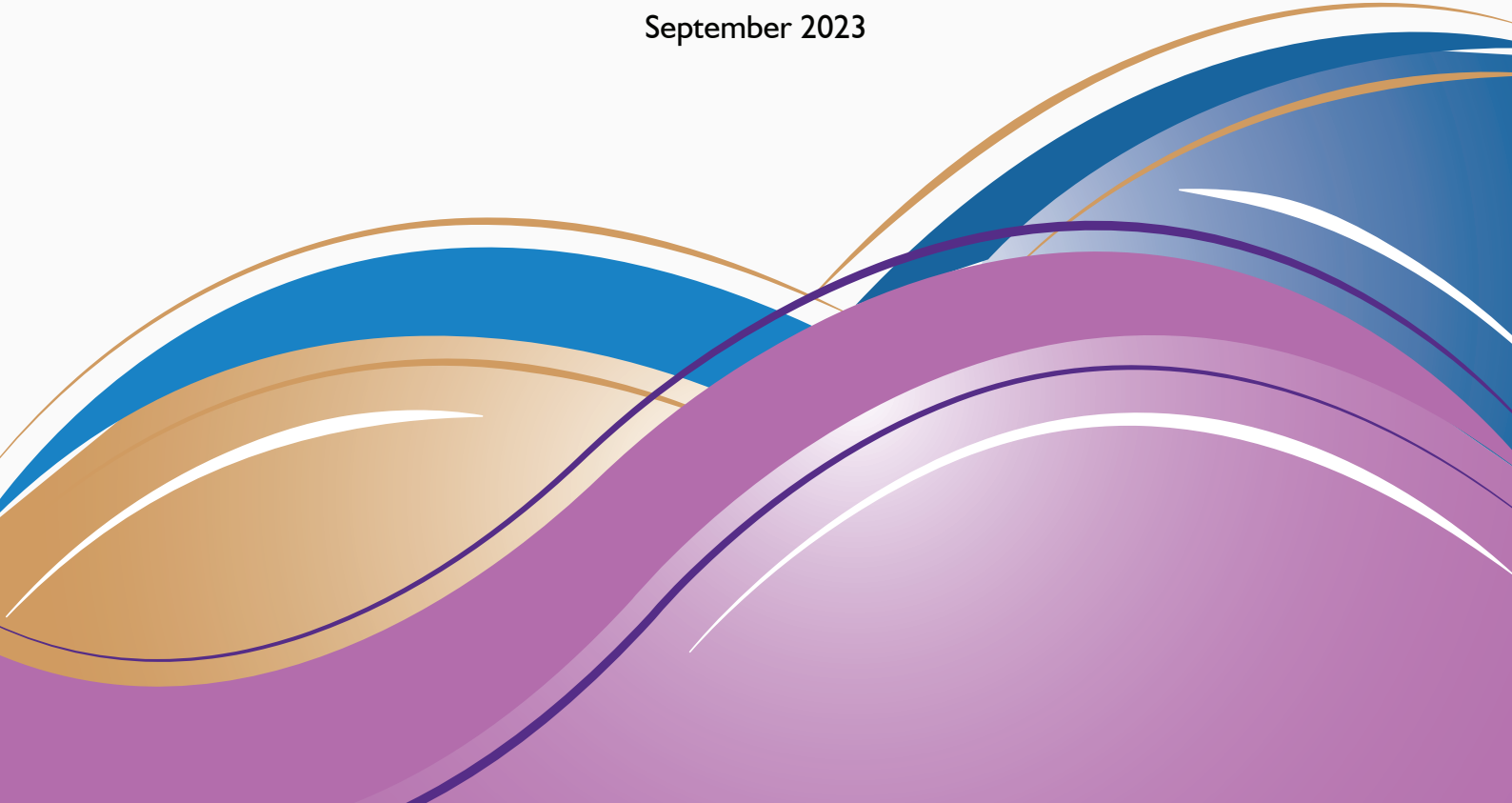
EuroMed Feminist Initiative  
المبادرة النسوية الأورومتوسطية  
Initiative Féministe EuroMed

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

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

September 2023





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## Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HTS	Hay 'at Tahrir al Shams
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MoE	Ministry of Education
Mol	Ministry of Interior
PYD	Kurdish Democratic Union Party
RCSO	Regional Civil Society Observatory
SCFAP	Syrian Commission for family Affairs and Population
VAWG	Violence against Women and Girls

## Introduction


This study presents how the dynamics of exclusion and violence have interplayed with education in three regions of Syria, namely As Sweida, Ar Raqqa and Idlib. The three analysed regions fall under different authorities: As Sweida falls under the authority of the Syrian regime, while Idlib falls under the Ta hrir Al Sham Organisation, and Raqqa falls under an authority of self governance. The study will explore how the curriculum in each of these regions of Syria is shaped by their incumbent authorities, understanding how this subsequently affects the society's understanding of exclusion and violence based on gender, race, ethnicity, and religion.

It is to be noted that after the 2011 uprising in Syria, changes were brought about in the school curricula. Particularly in 2015, they were modified in all the three regions analysed in the study, under the promise to adapt to the current climate of violence and conflict, as well as to the social progress

and technologies. There have been many studies on the role of school curriculum in nurturing a communal ideology that could serve to legitimate the incumbent authority. This is especially true in the context of dictatorial regimes who seek to incorporate their political party's ideological agenda in the psyche of the people through the school curriculum.

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 based on gender, religion and ethnicity, 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 coming from discussions held with citizens from different backgrounds and different areas in Syria for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to align the educational system with the broader goals of



peace and conflict resolution. This study also aims to shed light on how this type of education disproportionately affects women and contains acts of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Finally, it seeks to underline the importance of refuting the entrenchment of dictatorial ideologies created by both the Ba'athist regime and the incumbent authorities of these regions by highlighting the power of influence that school curricula can have on young students.

## Methodology

### The Theoretical Framework

The tenets of theory used in this study are threefold. First, the study focused on theories looking at gender-based violence against women and the negative impacts of these discriminatory acts in society. This is because the research revealed a very clear discrimination against girls in the educational environment, particularly due to a focus on the culture of military masculinity. Secondly, the study looks at theories focused on race and religious-based exclusion. It particularly looks at critical race theory. Third, it looks at the effect of using symbolic violence to create a *habitus* of exclusion and violence. This is based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the process of acquiring internalised violence because of it being widely disseminated in any given society.

### Design of the Research Methodology

The study was conducted in a period of three months, from May to July 2023, with one research team focusing their research on one of the three regions, all characterised by very different socio-demographic features<sup>1</sup>. The research was conducted through a series of personal semi-structured, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and surveys of a sample of society members in each city, As-Sweida, Raqqa and Idlib. Three groups participated, including students who undertook the high school curricula, i.e. from the ages of 13-17 years old, professionals in the field such as teachers who taught as early as before the 2011 uprising, and civil society actors and activists and experts of gender studies and socialisation.

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<sup>1</sup> As-Sweida governate is predominantly Druze (90% of its population, 7% Christian, 3% Muslim), Ar-Raqqa governorate is made of a majority of Arab people and a minority of Kurds; inhabitants of Idlib are mostly Sunni Muslim, with a significant Christian minority.



During the FGDs, 30 people (Idleb: 18 women, 12 men; As-Sweida: 16 women, 14 men, Ar-Raqqa: 13 women, 17 men) including 10 representatives of each category, students (13-17 years old, 7 female and 3 male students in Raqqa, 5 female and 5 male students in both Idleb and As-Sweida), teaching and administrative professionals (6 female and 4 male in both Idleb and As-Sweida and 4 female and 6 male in Raqqa), and civil society actors (5 female and 5 men in As-Sweida and Idleb, 4 female and 6 male in Raqqa) in each region have been targeted, with a total of 90 people being involved in the FGDs. 15 in-depth interviews with 6 women, 9 men have also been conducted, with teachers and actors of the civil society participating. 300 parents (199 women, 101 men) were also sent a survey about how they think the school curriculum and environment affect their children<sup>2</sup>. 30 participants were chosen per region including 10 representatives of each category, students, teaching and administrative professionals, and civil society actors. In addition, desk research has been conducted by the research team to complement the theoretical analysis and to build on the existing and available research on the region; this includes a review of the National Education book and the History book from the Ministry of Education (MoE) of the Syrian regime.

It is to be noted that all participants of this study have been shaped in one way or the other by the pedagogy of Ba'athist nationalist, masculine, and military ideology, deeply entrenched into the education system in Syria from 1963 onwards. As of 1970, after Hafez Al-Assad took power, the civil society, which normally plays an important part in shaping peace and education in society, was rendered moot.

Challenges included the difficult access to some of the participants in some cases, and the fact that some participants spoke with the fear of being observed by the authorities of their region.


## Findings

- **Violence in the educational system**

In all three regions, violence within the educational system has profound negative impacts on students across these regions, experiencing a military-style approach to

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<sup>2</sup> In all three contexts, the research team found it relevant to have a higher proportion of women interviewed in the survey. Since female parents bear the duty of care including when it comes to the education of their children. Besides, women were more responsive when replying to the survey, which is another indication of their involvement in this respect.



education that stifles questioning, enforces traditional gender roles, ignores mental health and traumatic experiences, and fosters discrimination.

- **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.

- **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 emphasizes 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.

- **Gender equality and gender sensitivity in the curriculum**

In all analysed regions, there is inadequate inclusion of 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.

The Regional Index on VAWG (RCSO, 2023) further reports that there are no specific programmes available in Syria for schoolteachers on gender equality and VAWG, respectively; the national educational curricula do not include issues related to VAWG, gender equality, and women rights; there are no specific programmes available for schoolteachers on gender equality and VAWG. Also, there is no gender unit within the Ministry of Education (MoE). A few awareness campaigns were conducted by

the Syrian Commission for family Affairs and Population (SCFAP) under the 16 days campaign to eliminate VAWG. The Ministry of Information (Mol) launched in 2022 a campaign titled “Do Not Remain Silent” for combating violence against women. The campaign aims to disseminate information on women’s rights and to raise the awareness of women victims on legal rights and the services provided for women victims of VAWG .

**Case study: Syrian Educational Curriculum  
As-Sweida**



## Context

Although As-Sweida did not suffer the systematic destruction witnessed in other areas of Syria, it grappled with the adverse consequences of the war, including economic hardship and significant youth migration. Throughout the conflict, As-Sweida governorate also hosted a considerable number of internally displaced Syrians, leading to a doubling of its population<sup>3</sup>. The governorate adopted a stance of positive neutrality in the Syrian conflict, with local youth refusing to enrol in compulsory military service.<sup>4</sup> Local brigades were formed for self-defence purposes and to protect residents from potential military campaigns by both the Syrian army and opposition forces surrounding the city. As-Sweida also faced attacks by extremist religious groups, most notably an ISIS assault in 2018. The governorate's residents assert that the army did not effectively defend them during these attacks, leading to strained relations between the governorate and the central authority, increased local arming, and internal destabilization efforts by the regime, including supporting criminal gangs involved in abductions, murders, and drug smuggling, exacerbating the security situation. 90% of As-Sweida governorate residents belong to the Druze community, 7% are Christians.

## An overview of the educational system

The Ministry of Culture in Syria declared the eradication of illiteracy in As-Sweida governorate in 2008 based on a statistical survey conducted in the same year, three years prior to the outbreak of the public uprising in Syria in 2011<sup>5</sup>. Data scarcity poses a significant challenge when analysing the educational system in the region. There have been no updates on government expenditure on education since 2014. However, estimates indicate that in 2022, it was only 3.5%, well below the recommended allocation for education.<sup>6</sup>

The curriculum in Syria underwent two stages of updates, first in 2008 and then between 2015 and 2018.<sup>7</sup> Ongoing changes are still being made. However, despite these continuous curriculum updates, there have been no corresponding improvements

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<sup>3</sup> There are no official statistics accounting for those who left or moved into the governorate. [Insights Into As-Suwayda's Position In The Syrian Situation](#)", Ishtar Al-Shami, The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, published in 12/10/2022.

<sup>4</sup> ["Sons Of As-Suwayda Renew Their Refusal To Enlist In Compulsory Services, And The Regime Fires The Conscientious Objectors From State Employment"](#), Asharq Al-Awsat, published in 15/9/2014.

<sup>5</sup> [With The Attendance of Mrs Asmaa Al-Asaad, As-Suwayda Declares Eradicating Illiteracy](#)", eSyria website, published in 15/10/2008.

<sup>6</sup> Aleco Observatory, <https://observatory.aleco.org/Data/?p=1399>.

<sup>7</sup> The Curricula page on the Ministry of Education.



in educational infrastructure, such as school buildings and classrooms. Enhancing infrastructure is crucial to support teachers in their roles. As one male teacher from a FGD noted, “The entire infrastructure is insufficient, including school buildings, staff, and educational tools and methods.”

### ***Lack of progress hidden under the idea of modernization***

The updated curricula aimed to align with modern educational principles emphasizing teacher-student interaction over theoretical lecturing and indoctrination. However, these updates fell short of their intended impact due to classroom designs following traditional layouts, where students sit in rows and passively listen to the teacher, rather than engaging with them.<sup>8</sup>

The situation worsened due to internal displacement caused by military operations.

The government failed to construct new schools or expand existing ones to accommodate the influx of internally displaced students. Class sizes swelled to 50 to 60 students per room, hindering interactive learning. Moreover, classrooms lacked essential technology like screens and laptops, and frequent power outages rendered available equipment useless.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, pervasive administrative corruption, starting from the highest levels, extended throughout the education system. This corruption included questionable appointments of teaching and administrative staff, misappropriation of funds from donors, and the leaking of national high school exam questions.

### Quality of the educational system

One of the consequences of all the above-mentioned problems (administrative corruption, lack of training, lack of meritocracy) has been deteriorating the quality of classroom teaching, as the teachers aim to increase their income with private tutoring. The finding of the survey supports this conclusion: 61% of respondents (17 male, 83 female parents) thought that state education is not sufficient for their children<sup>10</sup>.

Besides the impossibility of attending trainings or be formed of the so-called

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<sup>8</sup> Focus group with the civil society leaders and activists, held on 24/05/2023.

<sup>9</sup> [The Syrian Ministry of Education Starts An Investigation About Leaking Of End of Year Exam Questions](#). North Press Agency, 25/06/2023.

<sup>10</sup> Out of the 83 female respondents, 65% answered no, with 35% answering yes and kind of yes. Out of the 17 male respondents, all of them have answered no.

modified modern curriculum, teachers are also denied freedom of expression. They are forbidden to express any criticism against or even discuss the education policy. Interviewed teachers agreed that they are “not independent”, that the administration is always the third party determining the relationship between the teacher and the students, and that subjects like history and national education are used to reinforce the vision of political authority<sup>11</sup>, hence unveiling and combatting the modernization of the education system and its alignment to updated values systems and technological developments.

### Role of civil society organisations

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.

### Violence in the educational system

The presence of violence in the educational system is preventing students from benefiting from a learning experience, as teachers and the administrative staff continue to treat students as guilty, a reminiscence of the military education in schools. This translates into student being taught prohibitions, such as: “Never look your teacher in the eye or raise your voice against them” and the Syrian army’s slogan, “Obey and then object”. During the FGDs, students report that in case they argue back, male students are accused of disrespect, while the manners and upbringings of a female student will be questioned: female students will be subject to hurtful terms used to label her, which is a form of gender discrimination and gender-based violence.

Punishments are a common form of response, 78% of the surveyed parents thought that punishments are an ineffective form of preventing the repetition of a mistake,

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<sup>11</sup> Focus group with the civil society leaders and activists, held on 24/05/2023.

while 18% thought that they can constitute a form of discipline. These responses should be understood in a context that normalises violence against students, as a form of education, and as a reminiscence of military education.

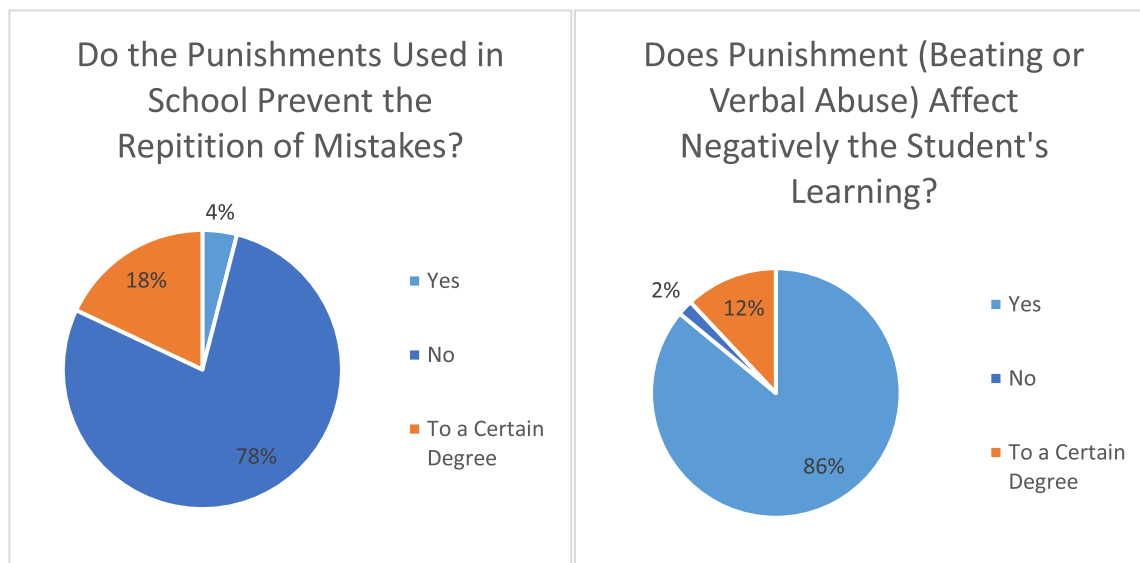


Figure 1 & 2: Parents' opinions about punishments students are subjected to in the education system in As-Sweida

The violence and discrimination experienced by students persist in both their educational and broader life contexts, leading to adverse effects on their well-being and educational progress. In the survey, 41% of respondents expressed the view that the educational curricula inadequately incorporate subjects and theoretical concepts that discourage violence. Nevertheless, these curricula neglect to address the emotional toll inflicted upon students due to the loss of loved ones during times of conflict. The changes to the curricula have all 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.<sup>12</sup>

Another facet of violence in the educational system is its lack of consideration to trauma and mental health issues. A significant 79% of parents have reported that their children are grappling with depression, shedding light on why As-Sweida has the highest suicide rates among all Syrian governorates, with an average of 23 cases annually.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> FGD with education experts, 27/05//2023.

<sup>13</sup> [Four New Cases Of Suicide In As-Suwayda](#), Alarabi AlJadid. 05/04/2023.



## Discrimination and lack of inclusion

The recently introduced National Education book showcases a significant shift in the government's approach to acknowledging diversity within Syrian society. This shift is an apparent response to rectify the deliberate omission of discussions on religious and ethnic diversity in the previous educational materials. The updated curricula now depict Syrian society as a mosaic, highlighting it as "one of the most diverse and multifaceted societies in the Arab world."<sup>14</sup> The term "diversity" appears six times in reference to Syrian society within the curricula.

Nonetheless, like its predecessors, these curricula persist in perpetuating the stereotype that this exceptionally diverse society is unified under a single collective identity: **Arabism**. Besides, the curricula refrain from providing specific details about the various ethnicities or nationalities that contribute to this diversity, such as the Kurds, Assyrians, and Turkmen. Instead, it consistently underscores the Arab identity of the society in question. In a similar vein, the curriculum addresses the concept of national identity and outlines the attributes of a responsible citizen tasked with safeguarding and upholding this national identity. However, it fails to provide a clear definition of the term "citizen." Notably, the Arabic language lacks gender-neutral terms, and the curricula consistently employ masculine language throughout.

Among the prescribed characteristics, one stands out, namely, the imperative to transcend any subordinate identities, be they familial, tribal, or sectarian, which might potentially weaken the overarching national identity. The government asserts that a sense of affiliation with a religious or ethnic group poses a threat to the collective national identity, which is symbolized by two key entities: the armed forces and the leader. Consequently, this tends to equate loyalty to the homeland with loyalty to the ruling party and its leader.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the lack of diversity in the curricula, there is a social willingness for education to be more inclusive. In this quantitative survey, a significant 71% of respondents<sup>16</sup> expressed the view that the educational curricula should incorporate more comprehensive content pertaining to the rich cultural diversity within Syria, including

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<sup>14</sup> The National Education book reads: "The characteristics of the Syrian Society: Diversity and Pluralism. The Syrian Arab Society is known for its diverse communities and lifestyles, and its diverse groups that are united by a mutual history and culture. This unity resulted in the establishment of a central political system and a unified country. This diversity expresses itself as a collective shared identity.

<sup>15</sup> National Education book, page 52

<sup>16</sup> Female respondents were particularly prone to support a more diverse curriculum (59 female responded positively vs. 12 male)

in-depth discussions of ethnic and national variations. Furthermore, a striking 88% of respondents<sup>17</sup> advocated for the curricula to be separate from and independent of religious influences.

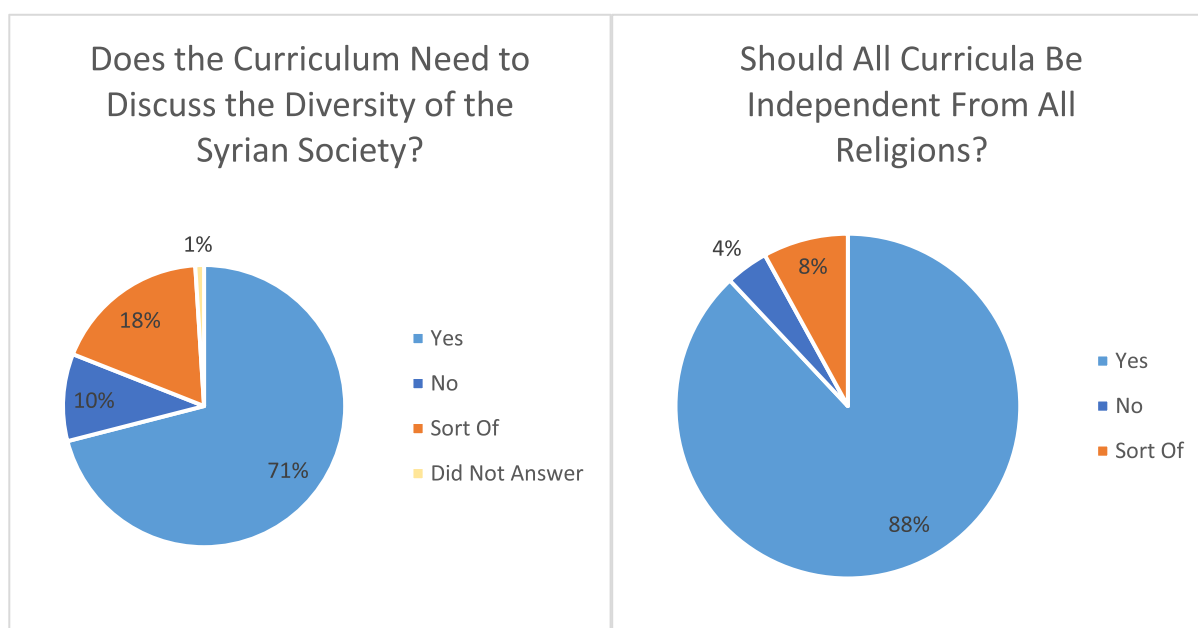


Figure 3 & 4: Parents opinions about the need to include more discussions in the Syrian curricula about ethnic, religious, and national diversity of As Sweida

### Inclusion and gender equality in the curriculum

The National Education books avoid discussing women and their roles in society, as there is no depiction of feminist or women role models, neither of gender equality nor issues related to women’s rights. On the contrary, the treatment of women in the textbooks is limited to brief excerpts from conversations involving a female broadcaster with a prominent scientist and doctor, a teacher, and a grandmother with her grandchildren. History books also sparingly mention female figures, and when they do, it is often to reinforce the official narrative of the authorities. The term “women” appears a mere ten times in the entire book, with the phrase “Syrian women” making just a single appearance within the lesson titled “Syrian Women Who Achieved Glory.”<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, the lack of visibility for women, as well as for women’s rights is

<sup>17</sup> Likewise, women respondents were proportionately more prone to have a curriculum independent or somehow independent from religion (78 women vs 17 male)

<sup>18</sup> History book for the ninth grade, pages 87 to 91.

coherent with the reality that women in the region are facing daily, being subject to discrimination and gender-based violence. One can argue that the lack of representation for women in the curricula is kept reinforcing and perpetuate social norms and practices rooted in gender-based discrimination.

For example, there is a widespread practice of segregating the sexes within the classroom, which is not only socially accepted but also actively encouraged. Discussions surrounding the interaction between male and female students primarily revolve around the potential risks of molestation or harassment, with warnings against such dangers exclusively directed at female students. During a FGD, one female student shared an example: “One of our female teachers adamantly opposes allowing male and female students to share the same bench. She justifies this stance with seemingly unreasonable arguments, such as the fear of harassment. She once asked me, ‘What if your trouser zipper were to accidentally open, then what?!’” Notably, these observations and cautions are directed solely at female students, with no corresponding guidance or admonishments provided to male students.<sup>19</sup>

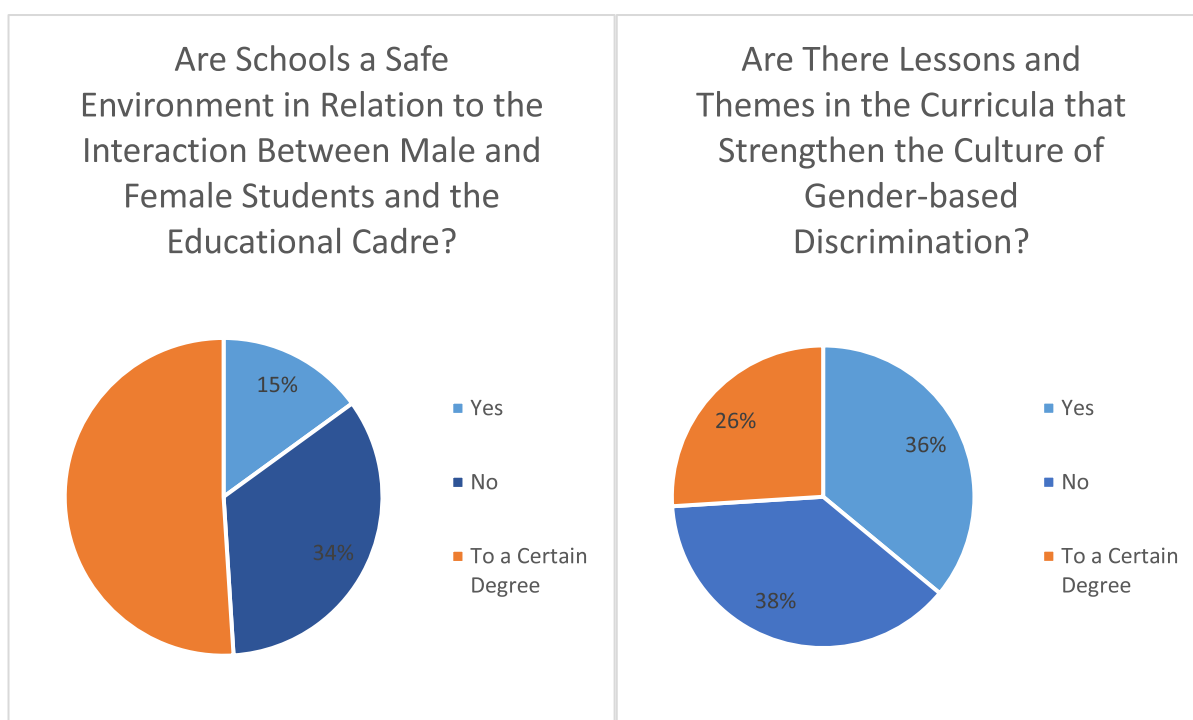


Figure 5 & 6: Gender Based Discrimination and the level of security and safety of the education environment in As-Sweida

However, parents have highlighted the problematic nature of the gender dimension and the educational system. During the FGDs and survey, concerns about the

<sup>19</sup> Focus group with the civil society leaders and activists, held on 24/05/2023. One of the psycho-social support councillors said “If a female student expresses a desire to marry, I tell her she is wrong. But if a male student was to express the same desire, then I wouldn’t mind, I would tell him (You are a boy and you get to say whatever you want)”.

pervasive gender-based discrimination within the education system have been raised and tackled, underscoring the need for a more pronounced gender dimension in educational practices. A 36% of parents believe that certain subjects covered in the curricula contribute to the reinforcement of gender-based discrimination, while an additional 26% perceive that the curricula, to some extent, perpetuate such discrimination, further highlighting the importance of addressing gender-related issues within the educational framework. The responses could be correlated with the recurring instances of reported harassment, with a substantial 43% of responding parents stating that they were aware of specific instances of gender-based harassment within schools.

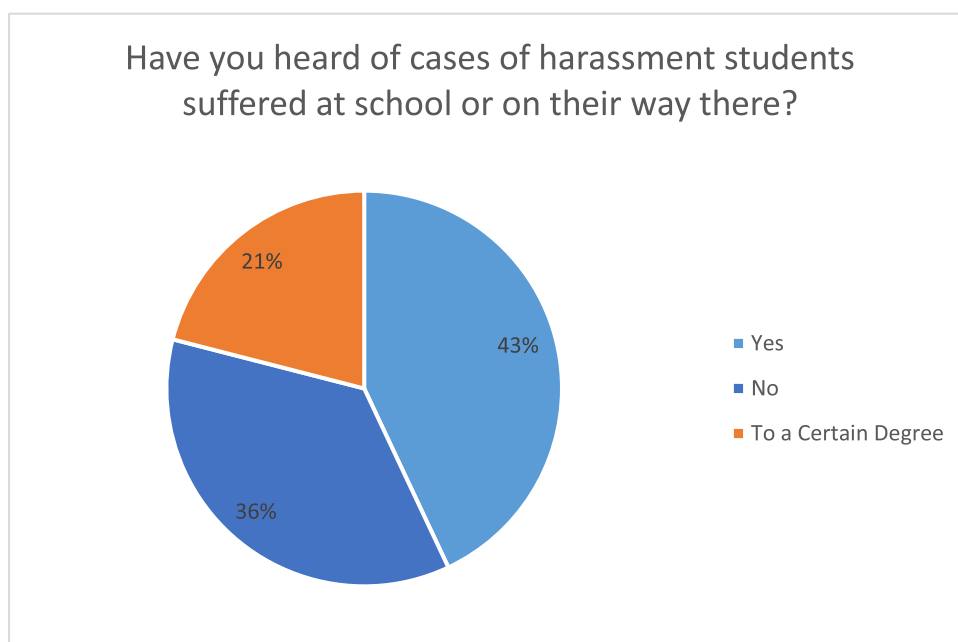


Figure 7: Have you heard of cases of harassment students suffered at school or in their way there?

### Education as a tool for propaganda

The Revolutionary Youth Union and The Ba'ath Pioneers, though not directly involved in education, were auxiliary political organisations aligned with the Ba'ath Party. They bolstered the party's ideology taught in Syrian schools. Students attended compulsory classes for twelve years, indoctrinating them with Ba'athist principles and emphasising loyalty to the party's leadership, even after a constitutional change in 2012. These organisations aimed to solidify the president's image as the eternal leader through the National Education curriculum, which attributed unions' rights to the Ba'ath Party. This ideological indoctrination took root in students' formative years,

prioritizing allegiance to the Ba'ath Party above all else. This narrative persisted until 2020, when the lesson on popular organisations, introduced in the 2012 curriculum update, was removed. The National Education curriculum underwent a significant transformation, with reduced emphasis on the 8th of March Revolution and unions compared to the previous curriculum. Instead, the curriculum shifted its focus towards modern definitions and concepts of civil society.<sup>20</sup>

The curricula, especially the National Education book, contain fewer references connected to the Ba'ath Party, The Corrective Movement, and The 8th Of March Revolution. Instead, there is a greater emphasis on lessons concerning the diversity of Syrian society, Syrian identity, national unity, and the integrity of Syrian territory. Most notably, the curriculum introduces a narrative highlighting the legendary steadfastness of its leader, inherited from his father. Additionally, history is used to justify current circumstances by drawing parallels between the 1925 Great Syrian Revolution against the French mandate and the 1973 October "Liberation" War against Israeli occupation. The book repeatedly links these historical events to contemporary issues, symbolically connecting national identity, the national flag, and the army to the current leader, Bashar Al-Assad, suggesting that his achievements in the ongoing war are a continuation of his father's success in the October War and portraying Assad's survival as essential for the survival of the Syrian state. This portrayal contradicts the democratic and civil society concepts taught within the same curricula.

Students are exposed to these achievements while the country around them remains in a state of widespread destruction. The book implies that Syria was once an exemplary nation before the onset of the war and attributes this transformation to Bashar Al-Assad, elected by a majority of Syrians in 2000, lauding his open-mindedness and forward-thinking approach. It portrays him as a pivotal figure in the development of modern Syria and presents him as the linchpin in the nation's salvation from an alleged international conspiracy. The text absolves Al-Assad of any responsibility for the current catastrophic conditions in the country. Furthermore, it recounts the foreign pressures faced by Syria in 2011 and asserts that the Syrian people demonstrated unity and sound judgment by preserving the state's institutions and rallying behind the leader to weather the crisis.

The educational system in Syria does not prioritize the cultivation of critical thinking

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<sup>20</sup> National Education book for the ninth grade, schoolyear 2020/2021, page 24.

and the development of well-rounded, discerning individuals. Many of the challenges affecting both students and the educational process itself can be traced back to authoritarian rule. The concept of national identity is presented not as patriotic sentiment for the homeland but rather as loyalty to the authorities, regrettably undermining the fostering of independent and critical thought.<sup>21</sup>

90% of the respondents argued for the need to separate the curricula from the political interests of the ruling party, 4% argued that there should not be separation.

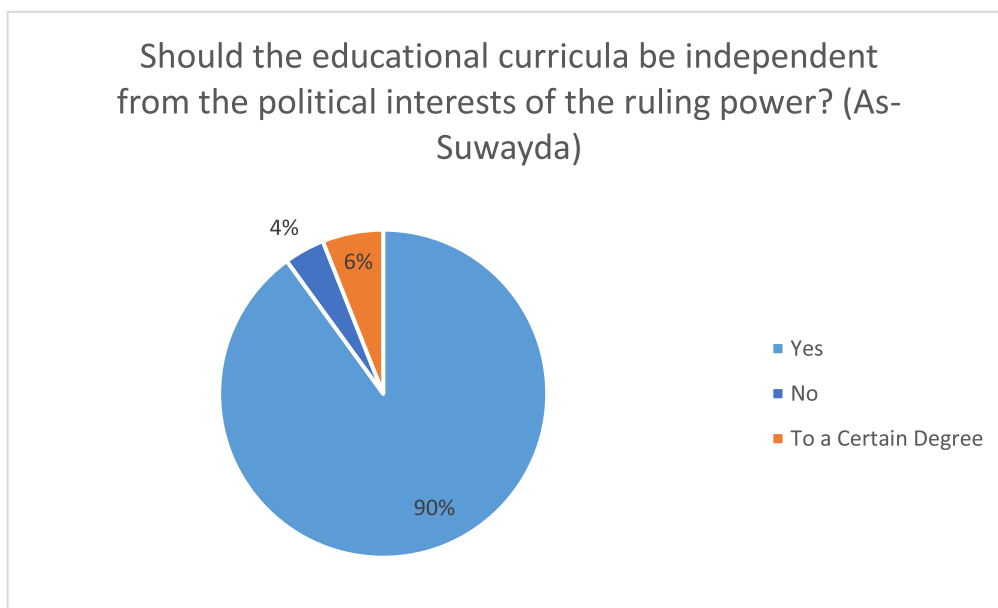


Figure 8: Should the educational curricula be independent from the political interests of the ruling power?

<sup>21</sup> Focus group with education experts, 27/05/2023.

**Case study: Syrian Educational Curriculum  
Ar-Raqqa**



## Context

Ar-Raqqa is currently under the control of the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria”<sup>22</sup>, after a succession of different warring de-facto powers controlled the city, taking over its rule from one another over the past twelve years. It moved from the control of the Syrian regime in 2011, to the opposition factions in 2013 after the regime withdrew from it. The city fell under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) organisation between 2014 and November 2017. During the military operations led against ISIS, an estimated 80% of the city’s infrastructure was destroyed by air strikes, including its educational and school facilities<sup>23</sup>.

## An overview of the educational system

### ***The curricula division***

Two completely different curricula co-exist in Ar-Raqqa and in the Autonomous Administration areas in general. On the one hand, the Autonomous Administration provides a curriculum approved for its public schools comprising two sets<sup>24</sup>: one is “a curriculum for self-learning” which targets students who have dropped out of school; the other is the regular curricula for which books are available in Arabic and Kurdish<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, most of the middle school and high school students in Ar-Raqqa prefer to study the curriculum of the MoE affiliated with the Syrian regime, taught in private institutes located in the area. They later take their exams in the As-Sabkhah area<sup>26</sup>, which is under the control of the Syrian regime.

Three main reasons account for this trend: first, the number of middle and high schools that have adopted and are teaching the Autonomous Administration curriculum is limited; second, most of the teachers in Ar-Raqqa are employed by the Syrian regime and its educational system ; third, many students and their families choose to study the regime’s curricula in private institutes because this academic

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<sup>22</sup> “Autonomous Administration Of North And East Syria” includes the governorate of A-Hasakah, the governorate of Ar-Raqqa and parts of the governorates of Aleppo and Deir ez-Zur. It is controlled by Syria Democratic Forces, which is mainly led by mainly the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

<sup>23</sup> [Has The American Army Done Enough To Stop The Destruction Of Ar-Raqqa?](#), Independent Arabia, published 02/04/2022.

<sup>24</sup> During the research we carried out for this study, we communicated with the official bodies to provide us with a copy of the curricula they use in the schools of the Autonomous Administration, but the bodies we communicated with ignored our request. Our requests to be provided with an electronic copy of the curricula were also met with hesitation and rejection.

<sup>25</sup> An education expert, focus group interview with teachers and education experts, held on 02/06/2023.

<sup>26</sup> As-Sabkhah is a Syrian city 30 km east of Ar-Raqqa. It remains under the control of the Syrian regime. There is an educational institute that allows students from Ar-Raqqa to take the national exams of middle and high schools. Students have to travel three hours from Ar-Raqqa to reach the city.



certificate is recognised elsewhere. During a FGD, a student reported “For me, the secondary school certificate “here” is not recognised elsewhere. I want a certificate that is recognised everywhere.<sup>27</sup>” This makes students to either leave the Self-Administration schools after completing primary school or join the eighth and ninth grades in a private institute. Failure to recognise the certificate of Self-Administration schools creates a kind of legitimacy for the Syrian regime in the minds of students and their families. It produces a societal tendency to reject the currently taught curricula or any attempt to develop them. It makes families prefer risking time and money to make their children take certification exams in regime-controlled areas.

### Quality of the educational system

Both the Autonomous Administration educational system and one under the Syrian regime fail to provide a qualitative education. The former lacks capacities in terms of students’ intake, educational staff<sup>28</sup> and facilities, such as libraries and laboratories. The latter also face a shortage of qualified educational cadres. Shortly after the liberation of Ar-Raqqa from ISIS, the Syrian regime put on “furlough” the educational personnel working there before ISIS; meaning that they could only return to practising their profession if assigned by the MoE. Many teachers left the profession, either for fear of security prosecutions or due the salaries’ cut. As a result, a new generation of unqualified educational cadres - with secondary school diplomas at best- were employed to fill the gap, thus reducing the overall quality of teaching in the region<sup>29</sup>. Another problem is the availability of textbooks. Most students buy Syrian regime books and try to hide them and deceive the Autonomous Administration’s checkpoints to be able to smuggle them in. The students fear that all or part of these will be confiscated<sup>30</sup>. Such incidents happen with History and National Education books<sup>31</sup>. This makes the students rely on buying pirated copies sold in libraries as an alternative to avoid smuggling the regime’s curriculum and being exploited by the smugglers and checkpoints. Many also tend to turn to e-books to study their courses via mobile phone screens.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> A female student said that during a focus group discussion with students, held 02/06/2023.


<sup>28</sup> Based on information in multiple interviews we conducted.

<sup>29</sup> Zoom interview with an employee in the Ar-Raqqa Education Council, 07/06/2023.

<sup>30</sup> The majority of the students we interviewed said that either all of or some of their books were confiscated at the checkpoints when they travelled back with them having bought them in regime’s controlled areas.

<sup>31</sup> An Individual in-depth interview, 25/05/2023.

<sup>32</sup> A group interview, 03/06/2023.



The co-existence of two curricula has devastating effects on students. In one of the FGD, a teacher reported: *“The most important problem we suffer from is that the schools teach one curriculum, while the exams test the students’ knowledge of another curriculum. The student in the Autonomous Administration schools’ studies according to one curriculum and takes their exams according to another curriculum, and this has not happened in the whole world except in Ar-Raqqa and Idlib. Imagine the tragedy we are experiencing. Imagine the student studying one curriculum all year but must take his/her exams using another curriculum.”*

Students who learn from the National Education book in the city of Ar-Raqqa report having a distorted vision about the reality of the areas controlled by the regime. In one of the FGD, one of the male students said: *“The conditions in the city of Hama, Latakia, and the rest of the cities must be better than in our areas<sup>33</sup>”*. However, many students expressed their shock at the extreme discrepancy between the picture presented by the book and the condition of the city, which is under regime control, when they took their exams.

In another FGD, a teacher of the National Education subject<sup>34</sup> said: *“I highlighted to my students all the important quotes, and I was frank with them, so I said: You are obliged to memorise these ideas for a certain period, store them in your brain, and put them down on paper, and when the exams are finished, you forget it, because you are fundamentally not convinced of them.”* Another teacher added: *“The concepts in the textbook are one thing, and reality is another thing. We teach our students things, that do not apply to their reality. It is impossible for a student of this age to be able to reconcile such contradictions.<sup>35</sup>”*

To the question “Do schools provide sufficient educational services to teach students well?”, 65% of the parents interviewed in the survey reported that they were not.

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<sup>33</sup> Group interview, 02/06/2023.

<sup>34</sup> An individual interview via Zoom, 27/05/2023.

<sup>35</sup> Group interview, 03/06/2023.

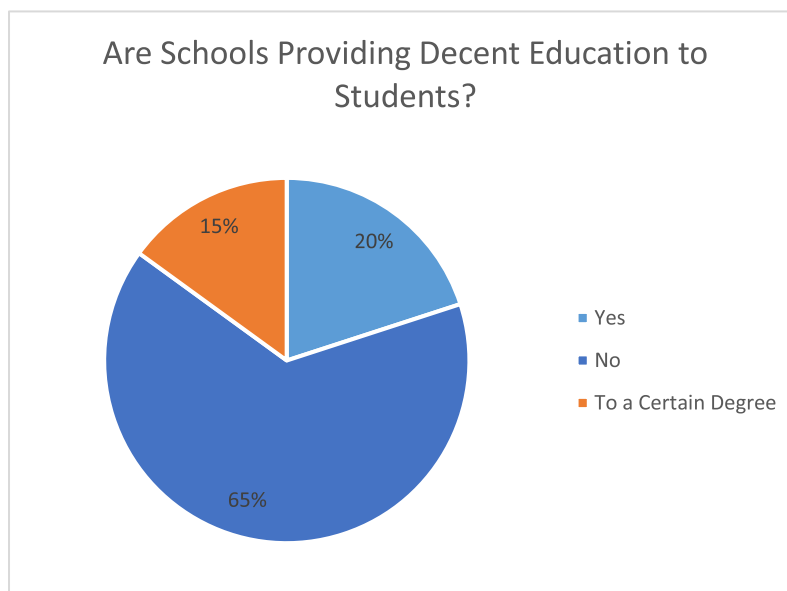


Figure 5 & 6: Gender Based Discrimination and the level of security and safety of the education environment in As-Sweida


During a FGD, one of the parents confirmed: *«In fact, I am unable to convince my children of the value of education in general. Even at the level of teachers in charge of education, they do not possess the required competence. They are not qualified to train our children»*.<sup>36</sup>

In summary, Ar-Raqqa's educational landscape is marked by significant challenges in both the Autonomous Administration and Syrian regime systems. The former faces capacity limitations, a shortage of qualified staff, and essential facility deficits, while the latter struggles with a lack of qualified teachers and a disjointed curriculum. The coexistence of two curricula complicates students' education, leading to distorted perceptions and a lack of conviction. Parents express dissatisfaction with the quality of education, with many citing a lack of competent teachers.

### Role of civil society organisations

Many local CSOs emerged in Ar-Raqqa after the liberation of the governorate in 2017 to support the restoration and rehabilitation of schools together with international organisations and in partnership with the Educational Council. CSOs also provided psychological support and personalised care to people with disabilities, ensured universal accessibility in school rehabilitation and worked on reintegrating drop-out children in the school system. Nevertheless, most of these efforts were constrained

<sup>36</sup> Group interview, 02/06/2023.



in terms of their extent and duration, and they did not consistently adhere to uniform quality standards. Therefore, disparities have emerged among schools within the same city, leading to increased competition in offering attractive teacher salaries, which has had adverse effects on schools administered by the Autonomous Administration. Furthermore, CSO-supported schools are commonly perceived as heavily reliant on external aid and lacking sustainability. Finally, the potential for civil society to contribute to the development and improvement of the educational system in Ar-Raqqa was not realised.

### Violence in the educational system

#### ***A widespread phenomenon***

In the FGDs, violence is reported as another factor for students to refrain from attending the schools run by the Autonomous Administration. The violence practised against the students is not new but is rather an integral part of the education system that Hafez al-Assad established. A teacher reports: *“The existing schools (...) are more like detention centres than schools. If they were not, the regime and ISIS would not have used them, in fact, as detention centres and military points.”*<sup>37</sup> The educational system is governed by hierarchical relationships which are seen as an extension of the hierarchical, patriarchal nature of the Syrian regime.

Inspired by military education, reported practices of violence range from imposing rigid compliance with school outfits and hairstyle, to prohibiting any cosmetics, insulting the female students publicly in front of their peers if they wore any makeup and teachers using coercive control over students and physical abuse. The gender dimension of this violence is evident. One female student interviewed reported that she left a school run by the Autonomous Administration because of such violence: *“When we enter the school, one of the teachers or the principal forced us to wash our faces in front of her to make sure that we are not wearing makeup.”* Another added, *“I am forbidden from smiling during school hours, to the point that one time one of the teachers hit me and accused me of being impolite and impertinent when I smiled.”*<sup>38</sup>

The military discipline inherited from the schools of the Syrian regime and imposed in the schools run by the Autonomous Administration have negatively impacted the

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<sup>37</sup> A discussion group with teachers and administrative staff, 04/06/2023.

<sup>38</sup> Group interview, 03/06/2023.

relationship between the parents and the educational institutions. In a FGD, a parent reported that: “The school does not teach values on the political and moral level. The problem stems, in the first place, from the manners and behaviours of teachers. They use obscene words and treat the students very badly. There are clear cases of bullying against the students.<sup>39</sup>”

### ***Effects of the education system on students’ mental health***

The fact that 57% of parents (female and male in similar proportions) report that their children experiencing depression due to the overall state of the educational system underscores a critical issue - the educational system’s neglect of students’ mental health and trauma. These statistics reflect a distressing reality where students’ emotional well-being is disregarded within the educational framework. The system’s failure to acknowledge and address the psychological impact of its shortcomings, such as disparities in curricula, resource inadequacies, and the challenges faced by students studying under different authorities, highlights a significant deficiency in prioritizing the holistic welfare of students. In a comprehensive and compassionate educational environment, supporting students’ mental health should be paramount, as it directly influences their academic success and overall well-being.

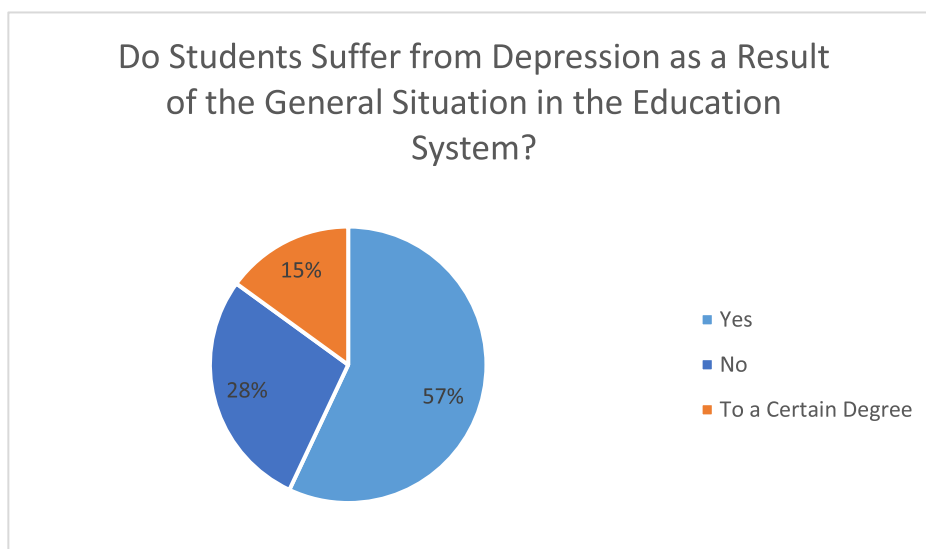


Figure 9: Do students suffer from depression as a result of the general situation in the education system?

### **Discrimination and lack of inclusion**

<sup>39</sup> Focus group session, 03/06/2023.

## **Arab nationalism**

The National Education textbook for the ninth grade issued by the MoE of the Syrian regime<sup>40</sup> (2012/2013 edition) states in the introduction that the book aims to build patriotic individuals who believe in and defend the causes of the Arab nation and to equip the students with the relevant knowledge about civil society and its principles, the make-up of the state and its foundations and the history of development of political thought in societies. It also aims to teach the students about the occupied parts of the Arab world and the meaning of national belonging and identity. By referring to the society as the “Arab community”, it reinforces the idea of an ethnic supremacy of Arabs over the other components of Syrian society. The members of Syrian society are later defined as being “distinguished with the sincerity of their affiliation and commitment to national and pan-Arab causes)<sup>41</sup>.

Ethnic and religious diversity is presented under the subject of “authenticity of society”<sup>42</sup>, where Arabism is described as a core element of identity: “The newcomers interacted with Syrian society and melted into its common cultural identity, Arab nationalism. This identity is based on the notion that Arabism is a civilised cultural bond, in which the Arabic language is its most important element”<sup>43</sup>.

The History textbook conveys the same ideology. A participant in the in -depth interview pointed to the fact that “the History textbook deals with the Arab character of Syria and ignores the ethnic and racial diversities of its society”. For example, the book, while explaining how to address and understand historical documents, uses an identity card photo of a Syrian citizen from Iskenderun (which was historically part of Syria before Turkey seized it) to emphasise the city is Arab, instead of simply emphasising that it was historically part of Syria<sup>44</sup>.

## **Language as a divider**

Likewise, the Arabic language is presented in both textbooks from the MoE as a key element of belonging, thus marginalizing all other languages spoken in the country. The Arabic language curriculum from the MoE is considered a “very dense and difficult curriculum for students.” For example, In the first levels of middle school, students

<sup>40</sup> National Education, Ninth Grade, The Ministry of Education in Syria, first edition 2012/2013, page 5.

<sup>41</sup> National Education book, first unit, first lesson.

<sup>42</sup> National Education, book, first unit, third lesson.

<sup>43</sup> History book, page 114.

<sup>44</sup> History book, page 15

study pre-Islamic poetry, which constitutes an additional challenge for students whose mother tongue is Kurdish.”<sup>45</sup>

During the FGDs, respondents also mentioned many incidents of polarisation and discrimination based on ethnicity between students from Arab and Kurdish backgrounds in the Autonomous Administration schools. First, Kurdish is imposed as the primary language in the educational curriculum to be taught to all students, an additional reason why students express reluctance to study there. During a FGD, one of the teachers confirmed that: “We, as teachers of the Kurdish language, suffered a backlash and rejection from the students when the decision to adopt Kurdish as a primary language was announced. Many students refused to interact in the classroom, especially the Arabs. In a class of 30 students, you will not find more than ten willing to learn Kurdish, while the others maintain that they do not want to learn the Kurdish language and wish to leave the classroom.”<sup>46</sup>

A female student also reported during a FGD: “In the classroom, the Kurdish students occupied the front seats, and some of them demanded that “others” speak the Kurdish language even if the students only knew Arabic. As a result, you now find segregation between the students. The Kurds only mingle with each other, and the Arab students, on the other side, do the same as well.”<sup>47</sup>

### ***Marginalising the area from the national narrative***

The History book from the MoE overlooks the role of Northeast Syria: the area is only mentioned as an economic extension of the city of Aleppo and as “the exile place of Fakhri al-Barudi during the era of the French mandate in Syria.” The region’s role in the Treaty of Sèvres or during The Paris Peace Conference 1919 is not mentioned. A respondent in an in-depth interview reported that: “The Jazira region has its heroes who fought against the French occupation, such as Ramadan Pasha Al-Shalash, who was not mentioned, nor was any form of resistance against the French occupation in this region.”

The History book adopted the names of the State of Latakia Mountains and the State of Jabal al-Arab, although historical documents indicate that these areas were named “The Alawite State” and “Jabal Al-Druze State”, to avoid discussing the different sects

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<sup>45</sup> A teacher, focus group interview with teachers and education experts, held on 02/06/2023.

<sup>46</sup> Group interview, 03/06/2023.

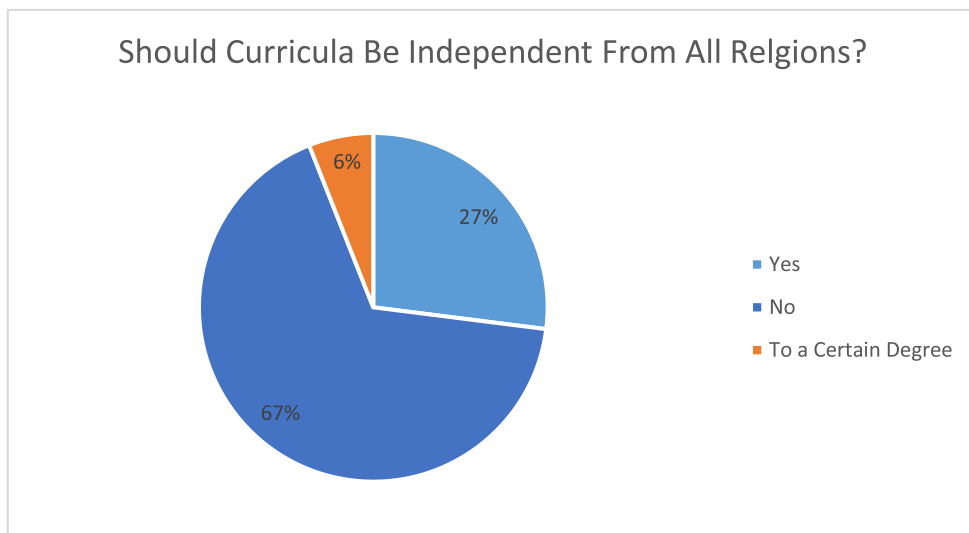
<sup>47</sup> A quote from a student who participated in a group discussion for students, 02/06/2023.

and ethnicities and to fuse them all into one alleged identity.

### **Religion**

As for the religious diversity and pluralism of Syrian society, the History book names many historical figures who played a prominent role in the country’s economic development. However, the curriculum limits the discussion of religious diversity in Syria to the Islamic-Christian dimension, which is confirmed by mentioning both the Christian and Islamic pilgrimage routes in Syria.

However, 67% assert that educational curricula should not be divorced from religious influences.



### Inclusion and gender equality in the curriculum

#### ***Role of women in the history of Syria***

The revised History curriculum predominantly depicts women as auxiliary figures to men. Nevertheless, it includes the story of Nazik al-Abed, highlighting her as a symbol of women’s resistance during the French mandate period. Additionally, the curriculum provides an account of the Latakia Mountains’ women’s resistance movement, drawing parallels with Sheikh Saleh Al-Ali’s revolutionary struggle against the French mandate. The textbook mention Sheikh Saleh Al-Ali’s wife as a role model



for other women<sup>48</sup>, paying tribute to the women of the coastal areas today, a regime stronghold during the conflict. The textbook completely ignores the historical activism of Syrian women in the rest of the Syrian governorates, their struggle against the French mandate, together with the feminist movement throughout Syrian history. The History book also refers figures like Mqboola Chalak, the writer Qamar Kilani, Salma Al-Haffar, Thuraya Al-Hafiz, Aisha Al-Dabbagh, and the first women who tried to enter Parliament. All of them worked in a period prior to Hafaz El-Assad's accession to power and in topics which are closely related to Bashar Al-Assad's wife, Asma Al-Assad, who is later presented as the "Protector of the Youth". The textbook does not include the names of other influential or active women during the rule of Al-Assad, both father and son.

### ***Sexual harassment vs sexual education***

Within the survey, a significant 58% of parents disclosed that they possessed direct knowledge or had received reports regarding instances of students encountering sexual harassment within schools.


Despite this concerning revelation, a striking 73% of these parents remained opposed to the incorporation of subjects pertaining to sexual education into the official curricula. This contradiction between awareness of a pressing issue and resistance to addressing it through education can be attributed, in part, to the city's deeply ingrained conservative religious tendencies. It reflects the broader tension between the recognition of societal challenges and the apprehension surrounding the introduction of comprehensive sexual education, which often sparks debate due to its perceived implications on religious and cultural values.

#### Education as a tool for propaganda

The National Education book begins by defining national belonging as "the bond that unites a citizen to his or her homeland and transcends any tribal and clan relations... and participation in national occasions and holidays". By extension, it conveys the message that those who participated in the protests in 2011 onwards, adopted the flag of independence and rejected the regime's national anthem are now excluded from the collective national identity.

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<sup>48</sup> History textbook, page 53.



The National Education book presents the President of the Syrian regime as follows: “Bashar Al-Assad became a president after a referendum in 2000. He insisted on reclaiming all the occupied Arab land and the occupied Golan Heights. He strengthened Syria’s international relations, and during his rule, an era of openness, development and the use of technology and IT started. The average individual income increased, many economic investments started, modern press emerged, and unemployment figures dropped. When Syria in 2011 faced tremendous foreign pressures, the Syrian people proved its unity and sound judgement, as it preserved the institutions of the state and protected them, and as everyone united in support of the leader to survive this crisis.”

**Case study: Syrian Educational Curriculum  
Idleb**



## Context

Situated in the Northwest of Syria, Idlib was one of the first cities to fall out of the control of the Syrian regime after the start of the revolution in 2011. From 2012, it was controlled by various armed groups of the opposition which initially managed the city. These groups' increased diversity eventually led to conditions of internal conflict favourable to the rise of religious extremist groups such as ISIS. Eventually, after its creation in January 2017, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was created, leading it to eventually gain complete military control of Idlib in 2019 after it neutralised the threats of other armed groups.

HTS' presence had many negative impacts on Idlib, particularly because it is listed on the U.S. and other Western countries' terrorist list. It also gave the Syrian regime and its allies the excuse for increasing their bombardment campaigns on Idlib under the pretext that they were fighting Jihadist terrorists, which caused further population displacement and infrastructural destruction.

As it stands, Idlib is in a very vulnerable situation, with most of its population living in refugee camps and being deprived of basic services and dignified living conditions. Indeed, the city's population went from 1.25 million in 2004 to 3.5 million by 2021.

### An overview of the educational system

There are around 315,000 children school dropouts in the Northwestern part of Syria, with 85% of them forced to work in dangerous jobs. Out of the 345,000 children that can attend school, there are only approximately 260,000 opportunities for children to go to school, particularly considering that schools and hospitals are amongst the primary targets of the Syrian regime and Russian bombardments. For instance, a study by Save the Children showed that in 2020, in the space of only 90 days, 217 schools were destroyed by bombs. This reality has been exacerbated with the February 2023 earthquake which destroyed an additional 11 schools and forced 395 children out of education.

The lack of children at school can also be explained by the extreme poverty of the region and difficult living conditions since Idlib has been a hub of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and bombardment campaigns, leading to the death of many family breadwinners. Here, students in Idlib can be divided into two categories, the first

are those able to reach their schools, and the second the second are those who are facing grave difficulties in doing so as they live in camps on the outskirts of Idlib city.

### Quality of the educational system

Among these camps, there are two distinct types: organized camps and dispersed camps. In the organized camps, children have relatively easier access to nearby schools, often situated within or close to the camp premises, where local, national, or international organizations can financially support the teachers. Even so, many do not find this salary sufficient and are forced to abandon teaching to work with better paying jobs. That said, the curriculum is mainly set by the MoE of the HTS government. The outcome is a curriculum that was revised in 2015, drawing from the Assad regime's school curriculum. However, in this new curriculum, the subject of National Education was substituted with Islamic Education, intensifying the focus on religious distinctions. Furthermore, the Turkish language was integrated into the curriculum, and all classes adhere to the prevailing government perspective on the Syrian revolution, aligning with HTS' discriminatory religious and prejudiced military ideology.

However, there are also the randomly spread out camps, where children have a harder time accessing schools as their tents would be too spread out with too few inhabitants to be considered an official refugee camp. In these cases, women who used to teach the memorisation of the Quran before the revolution in mosques organise themselves to teach young girls Arabic, in the aim of memorising the Quran. This ideological teaching happens outside of any official teaching frame taught in Idlib, which has an impact on the young girls' thought.

The Sharia department is a branch of the education system that was created by HTS to monitor how the teaching is given. It is another aspect of authoritarian monitoring, instilling a fear of saying the wrong thing in teachers, with an emphasis on Sharia law. The current school curricula were mainly changed by the transitional government before the control of Idlib by the HTS, but the latter worked on modifying the curriculum to fit a Sharia-based educational system. This study will now analyse the content of this curriculum and its consequences.

## Role of civil society organisations

The role of civil society organisations in Idlib remains very hard to quantify. Due to the fragmented governance and the deeply entrenched ideological elements within the curriculum, it is very hard for NGOs and CSOs to produce a real change in the curriculum. The de facto control of various armed groups, including HTS makes it very hard for non-governmental actors to interfere with the curriculum. It is to be noted that the strong influence of religious and ideological components 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.

## Violence in the educational system

Idlib's education system is different from the other regions in this study as this is a region that has been continuously exposed to bombardments. Most students in this study have known violence since the ages of 5 years old, when the revolution started.

In the classrooms, this violence continues as many of the systems of punishment are based on group punishments. This means that if one of the students makes a mistake, all students are punished. As a result, this teaching method teaches the students that they will be punished no matter what and encourages more rules to be broken and breaks the healthy student-teacher rapport. This method was directly inherited from the Assad regime's educational habits.

Both physical and psychological violence are used in classrooms. One student emphasised the negative impact that psychological punishments can have on his mental health, mentioning that he would be very worried if his parents were made aware of his misbehaviour, as this may have very painful consequences for him at home. HTS' allowing this violence to occur cannot be taken out of the context of patriarchy, as it allows for the marginalised members of society, such as women and children, to be treated violently. In the survey sent to the families of the students, it was clear that 65% of them (27 women, 38 men) saw that this violence was a negative deterrent to their children's learning (see Figure 13).

This kind of violence breeds more violence in society. In effect, 23% of the parents interviewed report that their children have suffered (10%) or have experienced to a certain degree (13%) bullying at school from educational staff (see Figure 11). That said, 80% of the surveyed parents did not see any violence integrated in the

curriculum, which indicates a certain internalisation of violence in society. Likewise, up to 54% of the parents interviewed report that administrative punishment used in school is either effective (18%) or effective to a certain degree (36%) (see Figure 12) and half of them consider that punishment used in school deter students from making mistakes (see Figure 13). However, 65% of parents report that punishment and beating negatively affects learning (see Figure 14). An alarming 72% of the parents report that their children suffer from depression because of the educational system (see Figure 15). The looming humanitarian crisis in Idlib cannot be ignored in this context as a possible additional reason for the high levels of depression and the normalisation of violence.

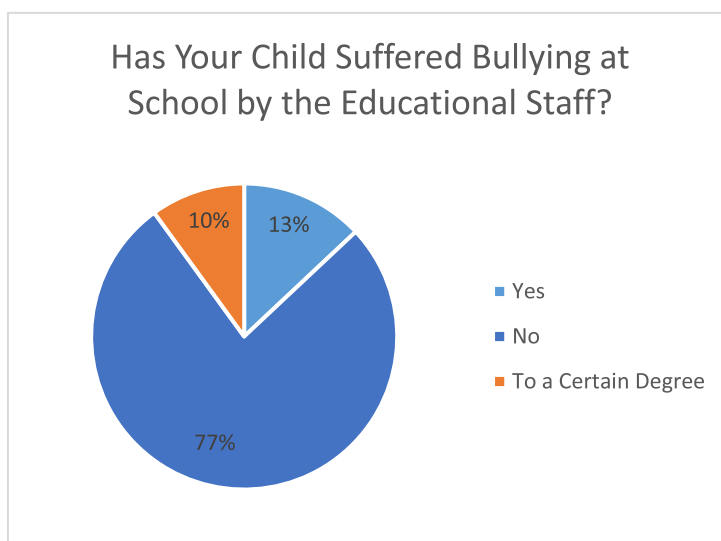
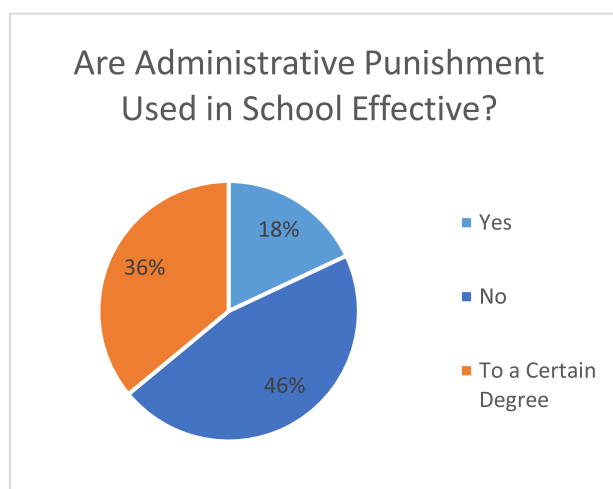
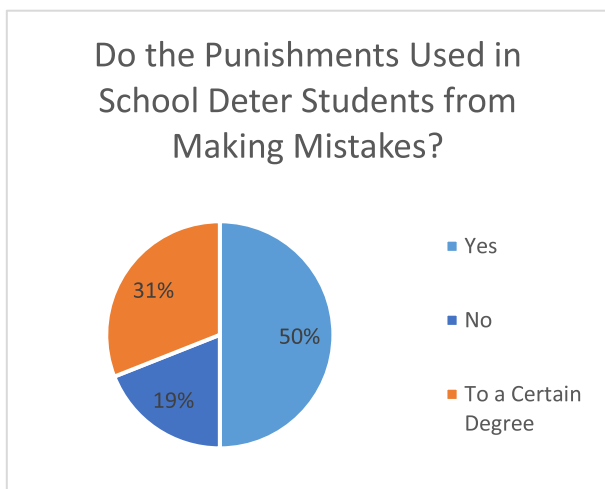


Figure 11: Has your child suffered bullying at school by the educational staff?



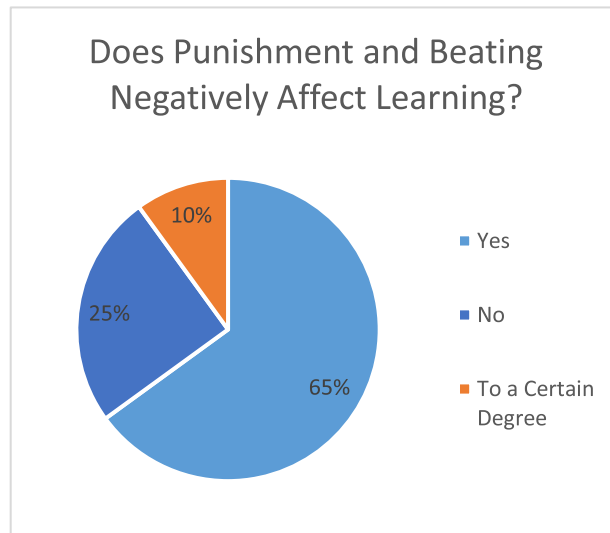


Figure 12,13 & 14: Parents Opinions about punishments in the education system in Idlib

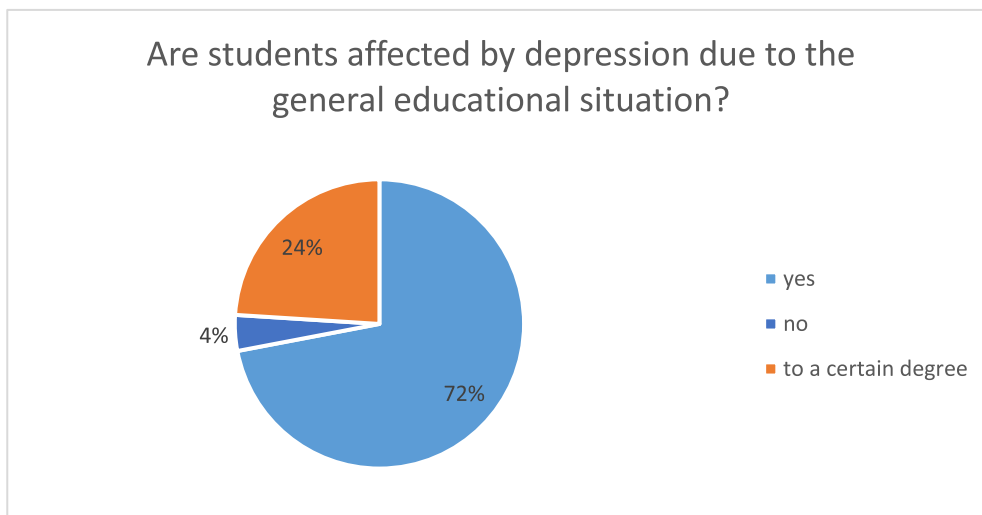


Figure 15: Parents' view on whether students are affected by depression due to the general educational situation in Idlib

## Discrimination and lack of inclusion

### ***Religious-based discrimination***

With the revised curriculum of the HTS, parallels can be drawn between the collective 'amnesia' that is instilled in the society. During history classes, many facts to do with some minorities have been deleted from the curriculum. Namely, the Alawite Sheikh Saleh Ali from the shores of Syria, who was a famous fighter against the French colonialists, was eliminated from the books. It is worth mentioning that this Sheikh



is from the same religious sect as the incumbent Bashar al-Assad, who's educational curricula also famously manipulated historical facts from its schoolbooks to the detriment of religious sects. Another example is the complete deletion of Hezbollah's role in the 2006 war in Syria instead of critically assessing it, potentially because of the violent acts committed by the party against the Syrian people in the war. This could be interpreted as discrimination against a particular sect.

This kind of exclusion in the curriculum has resulted in the return to ideologies of the Middle Ages opposed to the inclusion of other religions that are not Islam. One student that was interviewed expressed the need to guide others who are not in the religion of Islam on the right path. Whereas another student said that Christians should be allowed to live among Muslims only if they pay the 'Diyah' or the compensation money. These opinions reflect the extent to which the HTS's curriculum has managed to instil its own ideology in young students in Idlib.


### ***Ethnic-based discrimination***

Like with other religious sects, the school curriculum in Idlib is completely lacking a discussion on the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Syrian people, limiting the talk to the majority Arab people. This became evident when a focus group of students in Idlib was asked to describe Nowruz, given that Afrin, a majority Kurdish region, is next to Idlib. Six out of ten students did not know what Nowruz was, showing the lack of care by the incumbent authorities to tell the stories of other Syrian ethnicities to the curriculum.

### Inclusion and gender equality in the curriculum

Much of the curriculum revised by HTS was altered to eliminate female voices from learning experience. For instance, under the excuse of the Arabic Balagha, or Arabic eloquence, the female pronoun has been completely deleted from the curriculum's books. In addition, no female historical character is mentioned in the curriculum except for the Algerian resistance fighter, Lala Fatima Nasoumar, who was reputed for fighting the French in Algeria, thereby favouring women who died in battle. This echoes the Baathist education curriculum that only mentions women in patriarchal contexts.

In addition, the HTS actively tried to enforce gender roles. They separate boys and



girls in schools and enforce a mandatory limit of 15 girls per class for one to be opened. This restriction is not applied to boys. Thus, if there are 5 girls available to go to school in a certain region, they will not have access to education unless they find 10 other girls to fill that gap. In our focus group discussions, this segregation was not noticed by the students, which is undoubtedly a consequence of this gender segregation itself.

The striking aspect of the conversation regarding gender segregation in Idlib's educational system is that students perceive it as a normal aspect, adhering to societal norms. This perception may be attributed to the prolonged impact of war, poverty, and the influence of social media, all of which have solidified these values within Idlib's society. Additionally, students are taught at school that having girls in the same classroom can be distracting.

This philosophy of teaching also affects the teachers themselves, as there is a framework set in place in Idlib that female teachers must be managed by other female teachers, which is complicated by the fact that women teachers are not supported in the same way as men teachers. For instance, there is very little support for teaching scientific subjects in girls' schools.

### Education as a tool for propaganda

Like with other religious sects, the school curriculum in Idlib is completely lacking a discussion on the cultural and ethnic diversity of the Syrian people, limiting the talk to the majority Arab people. This became evident when a focus group of students in Idlib was asked to describe Nowruz, given that Afrin, a majority Kurdish region, is next to Idlib. Six out of ten students did not know what Nowruz was, showing the lack of care by the incumbent authorities to tell the stories of other Syrian ethnicities to the curriculum.

### ***The cult of the leader***

Many parts of the curriculum were altered to centre around the ideology of the incumbent authorities in Idlib. For example, what was known under the regime's curricula as the 'theft' of the Golan Heights is referred to as the 'selling' of the Golan Heights (by the regime). They also refer to Gamal Abdul Nasser's taking of power as

a coup but when Saddam Hussein came to power, he only 'took over' the rule. It is evident then that the HTS' curriculum aims to 'correct' historical occurrences and selectively chooses which leaders to create a cult around, according to its own point of views.

Interestingly, the cult of Jawlani, the leader of HTS is not emphasised in these books. This could be explained by the fact that the schoolbooks were printed before he took power, and that Turkey was mainly in charge of producing the books, while Al-Jawlani took charge of imposing his rule through religious worshipping and smuggling. Thus, it can be said that the worshipping went from the cult of the individual to that of the state.

### ***Identity***

The curriculum under the HTS authorities mainly tries to put in place an Arab, Muslim, and majority identity. This is mostly clearly seen in the history books. The textbooks disproportionately discuss the history of Syria and Palestine, using the latter as a way to create a shared identity, in a similar fashion to the Ba'athist regime, and legitimate the Syrian revolution. However, it has altered everything to do with the Golan Heights, specifying that Hafez al Assad sold the Golan in order to become president.

When asked about the identity of Golan residents, students of these history books, only a small portion of them identified that they had both Syrian and Israeli citizenship, while the rest indicated that they are Israeli, or were Syrian and became Israeli.

75% of survey respondents (21 women, 54 men) agreed that the curriculum in Idlib did not help in building a collective identity, and 44% expressed the need to add legal, constitutional and ethics courses to the curriculum to increase common identity building which shows how the Ba'athist regime curriculum has affected this series of respondents. That said, 66% of the respondents (45 women, 21 men) expressed a need to remove political ideologies from the curriculum (see Figure 16), 79% of respondents (47 women, 32 men) rejected separating religion from the curriculum (see Figure 17), showing that their collective identity rests a lot on religious identity.

Should Lessons Be Added About Constitutional, Legal and Ethical Rights and Issues to Help Strengthen Your Children's Sense of Collective Identity?

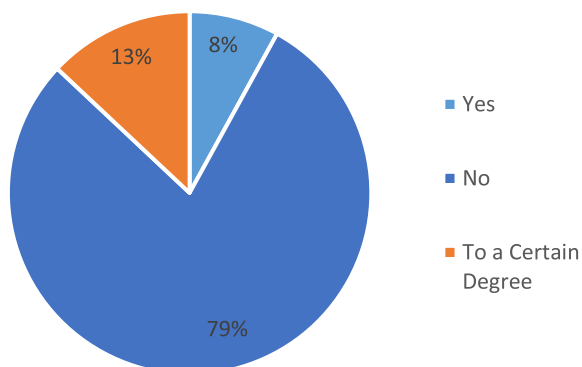


Do the Curricula Need to Be Independent From All Political Orientation?



Figure 15 & 16: The Syrian Identity and the curriculum in Idlib

Should the Curriculum Be Independent From All Religions?



Should School Curricula Teach About Syrian Cultural Diversity

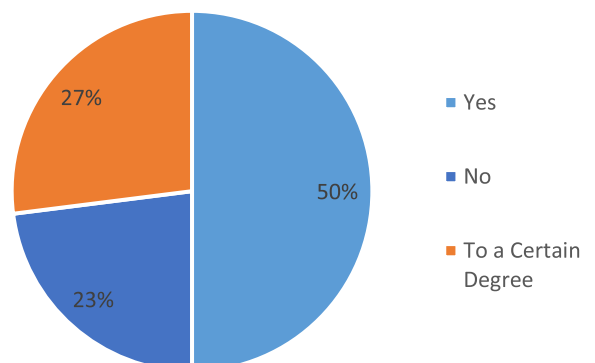


Figure 17 & 18: Religious and Ethic Pluralism in the curricula taught in Idlib

## 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

This study has brought to the forefront the intricate interplay between education and the dynamics of exclusion and violence within three distinctive regions of Syria, each governed by different authorities: As-Sweida, under the Syrian regime's control; Raqqa, under the authority of the Tahrir Al-Sham Organisation (HTS); and Idlib, governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The research delves deeply into how the educational curriculum within these regions is profoundly influenced by the ruling authorities, thereby significantly impacting students' perceptions of exclusion and violence. These influences are particularly rooted in issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, which are central to the study's exploration.

The central theme of this research revolved around the intricate relationship between the current educational system and the broader aspirations of peacebuilding. It brings to the forefront the critical challenges that peacebuilding initiatives face when the educational system incorporates or perpetuates elements such as violence, discrimination, propaganda, a lack of inclusion, and gender insensitivity. These elements, in unison, act as formidable barriers to the development of a society founded on the principles of peace, equality, justice, and inclusion.

Focusing on the educational landscape in the context of war and conflict, the study scrutinized how educational curricula can inadvertently foster violence, gender bias, and ethnic discrimination. The examination primarily centres on the curricula in Raqqa, As-Sweida, and Idlib, revealing how these curricula serve as tools for local authorities to exert military influence and influence students' identities and sense of belonging to a specific region.

Following a comprehensive analysis of these educational curricula, the study concludes that academic institutions effectively function as conduits for political activism, aligning themselves with the political agendas of local authorities in each respective region. This underscores the inextricable link between politics and the educational system's content and curricula. Furthermore, this research highlighted the direct and indirect effects of these curricula, stemming from the complex educational landscape, which has been deeply affected by prolonged violence, the decimation of the country's educational infrastructure, and a decline in educational staffing. Additionally, gender stereotypes significantly shape the content of these curricula, hindering educational access for many girls, particularly in Idlib, thus fostering marginalization based on



gender, ethnicity, and religion.

Despite variances in the governing authorities, the educational realities in each region are concerning. For instance, in Idlib, persistent infrastructure destruction has resulted in a dire economic situation, leading to an inability to adequately compensate teaching staff, who, as a result, seek employment elsewhere, leaving a gap in the region's teaching quality. In Raqqa, very few students attend school due to the region's financial dependence on the Ministry of Education. In As-Sweida, teachers deliberately lower the quality of their classes to encourage after-school tutoring for additional income.

These challenges, compounded by elevated poverty levels and economic decline, manifest differently in each region. Raqqa's educational curriculum is not officially recognized, with many mandatory courses failing to address their pertinent challenges. Idlib's students face the constant threat of bombardment on their way to and within schools. In As-Sweida, students grapple with a dual reality characterized by the glorification of the regime in the educational curriculum, which starkly contrasts with their everyday experiences. This problem also applies to Raqqa.

In all cases, the curricula promote a discriminatory agenda against minority groups. In Idlib, gender-based class segregation and the prioritization of boys over girls have exacerbated gender inequality and emphasized Islamic teaching. In Raqqa and As-Sweida, these disparities are reinforced by the teaching staff themselves, adhering to gender stereotypes. The consequence is a collective undermining of Syria's diverse minority communities.

Ultimately, this perpetuates the emergence of a new generation of young Syrians who perceive their country in a distinctly altered manner, drifting away from a Syria characterized by cultural diversity, and instead hindering the prospects for peace and justice in the nation.









