

Threatened future: Syria conflict cripples education

Fedra Rodríguez Hinojosa*

for *Oriente Mídia*

Many studies and discussions carried out by educators from different theoretical currents have shown, on several occasions, that the school environment goes far beyond a mere establishment where children spend hours a day learning basic math or reading texts. Therefore, it is well known that the school combines teaching and learning processes, promoting values formation and shaping social profiles. Those concepts have guided governments of some countries, and they have concentrated their efforts to make education a key aspect and a means of intellectual improvement. In order to achieve this goal, they propose agendas and direct funds to encourage enrollment.

Since the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party's entry into to power in Syria, on March 1st, 1966, primary, secondary and higher institutions have been a major concern for government, which oversees administration, curricula and teaching practices. Although some accuse the Ba'ath Party to use education to manipulate the masses and brainwash Syrian youth to perpetuate its ideology, it is undeniable, even for the opponents, that the Ba'athists changed education in the country.

The first step was taken in 1967, when Syria signed the Arab Cultural Unity Agreement with Egypt and Jordan, establishing an education system still in force today. Raymond Hinnebusch, in his book *Syria: revolution from above* (2002), points out the almost immediate effect: between 1967 and 1977, the number of students and teachers from elementary to high education increased by 85%, and access to schools has become more balanced between urban and rural areas.

During Hafez al-Assad's tenure (1971-2000), education policies were developed; the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1976-1980) had a major goal that was accomplished: the full enrollment of boys of primary school. Another objective was to combat illiteracy: in 1981, just about 2 million Syrians, or 42% of the population over 12 years of age, were illiterate. After two years, 57.000 adults already knew how to read and write, and more than 109.000 students were regularly enrolled in undergraduate programs at public universities. A decade later, that figure had almost doubled¹.

When the current president, Bashar al-Assad took office, the picture remained the same. In 2000, Syria signed an international cooperation agreement with Lebanon for exchanges in the areas of technology and culture. From that period onwards, the Syrian government has increased spending on schools and universities, under the plans established in 1967. Consequently, education became one of the most important sources of pride for the country and the beloved child of government: primary schools recorded an attendance rate of 97% and the secondary schools 67%, higher than values seen in other Arab countries such as Iraq and Egypt.

However, from March 2011, with the conflict outbreak, the scenario has utterly changed: in nearly three years, more than 4.000 school buildings were completely destroyed,

¹ Statistical data referring to Hafez al-Assad tenure were also obtained from: countrystudies.us/syria/37.htm

and the remaining ones are used as shelters for civilians or hiding places for armed groups. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), nearly 600.000 children and teenagers are out of school and the university dropout phenomena has reached worrying levels. Fear, ruin, lack of prospects, unemployment and psychological disorders brought by war are the main factors that threaten the future of Syria.

However, simply to bring forward all this information would only be a numerical report on the direct effects of war on Syrian people. NGO's and humanitarian assistance institutions, such as World Vision and International Save the Children Alliance, argue that it is crucial to take steps to try to reverse the process and ensure that the country can rebuild itself when the storm passes.

The first step is to map out a long-term project for an appropriate education of children and adolescents that still live in the country, as well as Palestinian refugees who occupy several areas: technical colleges and academies to cover all forms of teaching in preparation for a profession must be a priority, combining vocational and basic training, employment guarantee scheme and the reconstruction of Syrian nation. This set provides, therefore, an essential element at this point: hope.

Away from home, young Syrian refugees in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, also have difficulties in accessing educational institutions, due to curricular differences, variations in Arabic dialect and physical space limitations. The seriousness of the situation calls for an immediate action, like providing financial resources to host countries, which are currently under strong pressure. Changes in fund distribution would allow the installation of prefabricated school buildings, teachers recruitment and the purchase of educational supplies, also ensuring that the problems of schooling for refugees will be mitigated and avoiding a possible impairment in the education of native students, a fact that would further compromise the region.

The last provision cited by the UNICEF report, *Interrupted Education*, published in December 2013, could (and should) come first: the psychological support for Syrian children inside and outside the country. Many of them were conscripted into the fight between militias, others were used as human shields, and virtually all have lost a family member in a violent manner, personally witnessing the horrors of war without any protection. It is not possible to form an individual capable of participating effectively in the reconstruction of his own country, even if professional development opportunities are offered, since his expectations and emotionality are reduced to ashes. Hence, new schools must provide therapists and educators, able to work in back-to-school processes and to provide psychological support.

It is clear, however, that the above-mentioned measures are only palliatives and that the ideal solution is the end of the crisis. But, if this solution does not seem to be within reach right now, we should at least preserve childhood and youth, rescuing dreams which are hidden amid the rubble.

* **Fedra Rodríguez Hinojosa** holds a bachelor's degree in French from Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil, a master and a PhD degree in Translation Studies from Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil, and University of Seville, Spain. She currently works as a scholar researcher, writer, translator, editorial assistant, reviewer for magazines and websites such as (n.t.) *Revista Literária em Tradução* (Brazil), *Catalyst Ed.*, New York, USA, and *African Studies Review* (University of Massachusetts, USA). Her main research focus is Maghreb/Middle East literature, society and culture. E-mail: kikarh07@gmail.com