

# EDUCATION IN ALEPPO FROM DIVISION TO RECONCILIATION

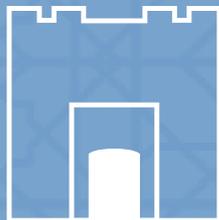
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Source: Abd Alrazaq Zaqzoq

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

The city was recaptured by the Syrian regime in **December 2016**. However, reconstruction has not started yet.

Schools in eastern Aleppo are not yet in use. Most of the schools that were not destroyed before the recapturing of the city were at least partially damaged during the heavy military assaults in November and December 2016.

Schools in western Aleppo are still hosting internally displaced families and the quality of education is poor and declining.

The Kurds in Ash-Sheikh Maqsoud are using two different curricula. The first one use only Kurdish from **grade 1-7**. The second one uses the Syrian curriculum in addition to Kurdish language classes from **grade 8-12**.

Security and the lack of infrastructure are the two main reasons preventing parents from sending their children to school in eastern Aleppo.

Most of the students in Aleppo are in need for mental health support due to the long period they lived under bombing and most teachers need training to deal with traumatized children.

# EDUCATION IN ALEPPO FROM DIVISION TO RECONCILIATION

## SUMMARY

Education in Aleppo has been as divided as the city. Children have been subjected to at least five different curricula resulting in an increasing divergence in what they have learned and how they have been taught over the past five years. These divisions in education are likely to exacerbate tensions if the conflict comes to an end as children have spent some time growing up under different systems. Consideration needs to be given to how to bring the educational systems together and how to avoid some of the post-conflict tensions experienced in other war-torn countries over education.

In eastern Aleppo, school buildings were targeted by the regime at an early stage of the conflict and were eventually abandoned. They were bombed because they served as public spaces for displaced families and activists. Most have been badly damaged or destroyed. On the other side of the city, schools in western Aleppo still host displaced families along with students. The quality of education has deteriorated and the number of students has declined due to the lack of security and qualified teachers. The third part of the city is the north-western part or the Kurdish part. It started out in a similar way to eastern Aleppo but then started to slowly change after Kurdish militias gained control.

The western part of the city has always remained under the control of the Assad regime. It mainly uses the same curricula which was revised in 2011. In 2015, the Ministry of Education has tried to improve the curriculum by introducing more advanced math, science and English courses. This created problems as there were no experienced teachers to cope with the new textbooks.

The eastern part of the city, held by rebels until December 2016, saw the largest variety of curricula. It started by using the Libyan curriculum and then the Saudi curriculum. After that, the Syrian coalition, one of the main opposition groups, stepped in with the 'revised Syrian curriculum' which is used by the 'Free Ministry of Education' and the majority of NGOs working on education. However, there were some places where parents sent their children to mosques where they were taught only Arabic and the Quran.

As for the Kurdish part, the area switched control between the regime and opposition before coming fully under the control of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). YPG's first curriculum was the 'revised Syrian curriculum'. At a later stage, the Kurdish language was added to the curriculum. At the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year, the largest Kurdish neighborhood started using a new curriculum supervised by the YPG. Primary schools now use a Kurdish curriculum and secondary and high schools use the Syrian regime curriculum while also teaching the Kurdish language.

## BACKGROUND

Aleppo is a fairly conservative Sunni city. Religious education provided by the al-Madrassa al-Shar'iyya was important, particularly in the Old City. Families often sent their children to attend Quranic classes in the summer. These courses were not considered formal education and students did not receive certification for attending.

The formal education system was very centralized. All schools taught the same curriculum and followed the same regulations determined in Damascus by the Ministry of Education. Ethnic and religious diversity was not taken into consideration nor was it reflected in the curriculum, except in some minor cases. For example, Christian students studied the same curriculum except for religious education classes. In schools with Muslim and Christian students, religion was taught separately. The exclusion of most ethnic minority languages and cultures before the war was a significant problem for the Kurdish community. Kurds were not allowed to study their language in schools till 2015. The only exception before the conflict was for the Armenian community. Armenians have their own schools with a slightly different curriculum. They study four hours of Armenian language and one hour of religion. They also use different English course books.

The eastern part of the city went through various experiments in terms of curricula and school management. The main Kurdish neighborhood, ash-Sheikh Maqsoud, started using a Kurdish-language curriculum at the primary school level. The western part of the city and the Armenian community continued to follow the old system.

## EDUCATION AND CONFLICT

Education plays a central role in reconstruction, reconciliation and sustainable peacemaking in post-conflict areas. Reconstruction means more than just rebuilding what the conflict has destroyed in terms of hard infrastructure. During conflicts, schools become targets and different armed groups compete to take them over so they can be used for various purposes, including as military bases or weapons storage. Many schools have been destroyed during the conflict. There is an urgent need to reconstruct schools. This can be a first step in encouraging teachers, students and their families to come back. Conflicts harden divisions between people from different ethnic or religious groups or social classes.<sup>1</sup> It is through education that these walls can be broken down and the gap can be reduced. An education system and its curriculum is of the most important policies when thinking about reconstructing divided societies.

What has often occurred is that one group inserts its political agenda by taking over the education system and curriculum. Even if an agreement is reached, the probability of having another more aggressive conflict is quite

high. In the case of Aleppo, the government will almost certainly revert to teaching a curriculum that was rejected by most people in the east of the city.

Although it can be argued that education contributed to conflict in the first place,<sup>2</sup> teaching can be a tool to recover social cohesion. It is through education that people can understand the meaning of living together and working together to rebuild what a conflict has damaged. Local civil society organizations can play the role of mediator in this process.

## THE CONFLICT IN ALEPPO

### 1. Class and Ethnic Divisions

Aleppo was a deeply divided city before violence split it in half. Wealthier people lived in the west, the area that remained under government control. The eastern half of the city was made up of poor neighborhoods and informal settlements, many of them populated by families who had moved to the city as livelihoods became more precarious in rural areas.

The Christian population, which belongs mainly to the upper middle class of Aleppo, lived in the center of the city. These neighborhoods were considered part of western Aleppo up to December 2016. North-west of the center there are two main areas. Al-Midan and Shari' al-Villat to an extent are heavily populated with Armenians. Ash-Sheikh Maqsoud and al-Ashrafiyeh are farther west. They are mainly Kurdish. The regime took control of central and western Aleppo as they had the most sensitive institutions. The rebels took hold of the eastern part of the city before there were pushed out by the regime and its allies in December, 2016. The Kurdish north-west part is controlled by ethnic militias.

### 2. Education Overview

Education in Aleppo followed ethnic and class divisions. In western Aleppo, state schools were newly built and well-equipped with computer labs and experienced teachers. However, most parents sent their children to private schools. Private schools had extra foreign language classes and small class sizes. Private schools have been around for more than a century but more opened after a liberalization of education policy in 2003. Aleppo College was founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as a private institution. The ICARDA International high school was founded in 1977 to provide schooling for the staff at the international agricultural center. The French Lycee in Aleppo (MLF) dates from 1997.<sup>3</sup>

Within a few years, there were many more private schools on the outskirts of Aleppo. There were at least fifty new private schools in the province of Aleppo said A. M., a former employee in the city's education department.<sup>4</sup> This had a "huge impact on the quality of education in the city" he added.<sup>5</sup> Public schools lost their best teachers to private schools where wages were higher and conditions better.

Divisions in income and facilities were worsened by government policies that channeled more money to schools in western Aleppo. "It was only after the conflict that we saw classrooms in western Aleppo full of students and the resources being used," said A.N..<sup>6</sup>

As for the eastern part of the city, schools were often new but poorly equipped. Most schools had one or two computers, but some had none. They were overcrowded with up to 60 students in primary classes and 40 in high school. Not all teachers were experienced, in part because there was a tacit obligation for new teachers to teach for two years in the eastern part of Aleppo before moving to the center or the western areas. Kurdish schools were similarly poorly equipped.

When the city was divided in 2012, education went through several changes. In the western areas, the main change was an initial decline in student numbers as families fled the war. However, large numbers of displaced people moved into the area, adding to the numbers in classes and changing the atmosphere in schools. "The regime started introducing more advanced course books especially in math and science. Russian language was introduced as the second foreign language to replace French,"<sup>7</sup> according to one teacher. The main problem was a lack of experienced teachers. Teachers did not know how to teach using new textbooks. Also, many teachers fled the country, which led the regime to hire young teachers without effective training.

In eastern Aleppo schools were targeted by the regime as part of an effort to drive the population out of the city and to clear the country of opponents. This happened at a very early stage of the conflict and people were scared to send their children to school for security and safety reasons. Schooling started to take place at mosques, private houses, apartment buildings and underground schools. The question remained, which curriculum should be used?<sup>8</sup>

Some schools started using the new Libyan curriculum, which had been approved by the Arab League for use by Syrians outside of government areas. This focuses mainly on Arabic and Islamic studies for three days, and math, physics and English for the other three days. "Courses like social sciences, philosophy, psychology or other courses that encourage critical thinking are not taught," said Huzayfa Tfankaji, an education manager with the NGO Ihsan Relief & Development.<sup>9</sup> Some schools tried the Saudi curriculum, which is similar but with more focus on Shari'a law. K.A, a resident of eastern Aleppo said that, "My nephews studied the Saudi curriculum in al-Ferdos neighborhood at the beginning of 2013."<sup>10</sup> He added that "The books were mainly taught at mosques."<sup>11</sup> The two curricula spread in areas where civil society organization have limited access due to heavy bombing that was done by the regime.



Source: Al-Muthanna Ibn Haritha school

In April 2013, the Syrian Coalition revised the Syrian curriculum. This version was put together by the Syrian Education Commission, an NGO founded in Turkey in December 2012.<sup>12</sup> It was based on the national curriculum published in early 2011 but the Syrian Education Commission removed the National Studies course that mainly praised the Assad family and the Baath party and excised Assad's speeches and pictures from all course books. Most importantly, it changed history and geography textbooks without any public debate. Some of these changes related to the Syrian regime such as presidential speeches and accounts of the Syrian-Israeli conflict. Other changes related to the Ottoman era. Whereas it used to be called the 'Ottoman Occupation,' it is now called 'Ottoman Rule.'

At the beginning of the conflict, Kurdish areas were targeted by the regime. At a later stage, the Free Syrian Army and other rebel groups fought against Kurdish militias as they were siding with the government. Education was left behind at the beginning in al-Ashrafiyeh and ash-Sheikh Maqsoud. In mid- 2015, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) came to control the whole area of ash-Sheikh Maqsoud, the most highly populated area in Aleppo.

At the beginning of 2014, PYD piloted an entirely Kurdish curriculum in Tal Abyad, a town in north east Syria bordering Turkey. They printed more than 40,000 text books and employed Kurdish instructors in all the areas of northern Syria.<sup>13</sup> Later in the same year, the curriculum was introduced in Afrin, Kobane and aj-Jazeera in what Kurds referred to as Rojava. As of the 2014-2015 school year "This course started to be used in the city of Aleppo in ash-Sheikh Maqsoud" said F.H, an activist working in the area.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand,

in al-Ashrafiyeh, control on the ground keeps changing. This is reflected in education. As of June 2016, the Free Ministry of Education in Aleppo controlled its schools and was using the 'Revised Syrian Curriculum' with Kurdish as a second language<sup>15</sup>.

After recapturing the city in December 2016, the Syrian regime allowed the Kurdish curriculum till grade seven. Then the Syrian curriculum was reintroduced in Kurdish school along with Kurdish language classes in ash-Sheikh Maqsoud after grade seven again.

## CHALLENGES AND LIMITS

### 3. Challenges in Eastern Aleppo during the Siege

The main difficulty in the eastern half of the city was security. After 24 students died in an attack on Ain Jalout School in eastern Aleppo in April 2014, many parents were reluctant to allow their children to go to school.<sup>16</sup> NGOs moved schools to apartment buildings or basements.<sup>17</sup> Even these were not always safe because many informal settlements in eastern Aleppo were poorly constructed and there was considerable risk of collapse in a heavy bombardment. The Free Ministry of Education established an office dedicated to investigating the safety and the suitability of buildings to be used as schools. The office had several civil engineers who visit schools, especially after an attack, to decide whether to change the location or add extra precautions.<sup>18</sup>

Another serious problem was the shortage of experienced teachers. Most teachers have fled the city to find refuge in the countryside of Aleppo, in Turkey, or in a safer Syrian city. NGOs tried to keep students in school but struggled to find teachers. Before the conflict, the majority of teachers in Aleppo were either graduates from the Department of Education and Pedagogy or university graduates who passed the national teachers' exam. Muhammad Abu Yazan, who works for Qabas Institution for Education, said that the Education Department in eastern Aleppo had started hiring people who had just finished high school and did not have any experience. In some cases, they had hired students who had not even graduated high school. In addition, inexperienced teachers were "not able to deal with traumatized children [or] children in conflict areas."<sup>19</sup> A recent major research done by Save the Children between December 2016 and February 2017 found a widespread evidence of "toxic stress" among Syrian children who are trapped in Syria.<sup>20</sup> This issue should be addressed widely and seriously on this stage both with students and with teachers.

At the beginning of the conflict, most NGOs and donors focused on humanitarian aid, mainly food, shelter and medicine. "Education was secondary in importance" said Abu Yazan.<sup>21</sup> Access to new course books and foreign language books was very limited in the eastern part of Aleppo. Also, at first, the Free Ministry of Education paid teachers 35 USD a month, what Mayas described as "not enough for survival." With the support of donors, teachers eventually received 100 USD.<sup>22</sup>

In eastern Aleppo, inadequate spaces such as apartments and basements housed most schools. According to Marcell Shehwaro, Executive Director of Kesh Malek in Gaziantep. “Spaces are very small with no yards and most of the time basements do not even have toilets. Another important issue is accessibility for disabled children,” said Shehwaro.<sup>23</sup> The conflict has left as a huge number of young children, teenagers and adults disabled and most cannot attend school due to lack of access and facilities.



Source: Al-Muthanna Ibn Haritha school

“Some parents send their children to the closest mosque where children will [only learn] to read and write in Arabic and the Quran,”<sup>24</sup> said Shehwaro. Sometimes, the closest school is not the best option. Shehwaro pointed out that some schools were heavily influenced by rebel groups’ political and religious agendas. For example, “there is gender segregation and gendered schools starting at age 10 in areas controlled by the al-Nusra Front.”<sup>25</sup>

Abu Ahmad, a father of three school-aged children, said his ten-year-old son had not been able to attend school because schools near his house were not safe and the closest school was more than half an hour walk.<sup>26</sup> He said that sending his son Ahmad to the mosque was the best he could do for now. “At least Ahmad will learn how to read and write and will teach his sister Aya, who is seven years old, at home.”<sup>27</sup> Other parents sent their children to schools affiliated with militias, which often altered the curriculum to suit their religious or ideological views.

Teachers, activists and NGOs were mostly focused on short-term solution to immediate problems of security and shortages. However, this should not stop policy and decision makers from considering a long-term, sustainable education system.

“Just in October 2015, the Free Ministry of Education decided to work together with most of the NGOs working on education to unify the curriculum and teaching system. They also designed an exam teachers would need to pass to teach at public schools,” said Mayas who coordinated between the Free Syrian Ministry of Education and NGOs in Aleppo.<sup>28</sup>

This created a new challenge as the Free Ministry of Education would like to automate its data and link teachers in different schools with email. Most older teachers do not have much computer experience and still manually complete all forms by hand. Also, using email to communicate with teachers is not popular in eastern Aleppo as most schools did not have computers before.

Unfortunately, the Free Ministry of Education employed the same bureaucratic system that has been used in Syria for more than four decades. Its system is based on memorizing information and contains little training in critical thinking. The old system does not work.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, “creating a better curriculum and starting a new education system is not possible under the current situation either.”<sup>30</sup>

Syria has the expertise to design a better curriculum and the country has experienced a variety of different alternative education systems. The time, however, has not yet come to prioritize these changes. The three curricula that have been used have very important differences in terms of building national identity and collective understandings of history and geography. If policy makers and educators do not seriously take into consideration the changes and the differences in curricula that are taking place, especially in the eastern part of the city, we will have a larger ethnic and class division in the city in this coming stage, especially after the recapturing of the city by the Syrian regime.

After the Syrian regime recaptured the city, security is still a major concern for parents to send their children to school. “The whole area is not safe yet and there is a big risk, especially for young girls to go to school.” said Mustafa who just moved back to Al-Mashhad area.<sup>31</sup> The other main challenge is the school buildings which have been either destroyed or heavily damaged lately. Finally, most of the teachers who were in eastern Aleppo till the end of December either left in the evacuation to Idlib or managed to cross the border to Turkey. This has created an even bigger pressure on the functioning schools in the city with the small number of experienced teachers remained in Aleppo.

### **Challenges in Western Aleppo:**

Although challenges faced by the western side of the city cannot be compared to those in the east, significant challenges do exist. At the beginning of the conflict, many families moved to the other side of the city and took refuge in public schools. Everybody thought the situation would be temporary. Now, few families are returning to the eastern part, but many public schools in the west still host displaced families.

This limited the space available in schools for education and finally overcrowding reached western Aleppo. Schools stopped being a calm place for students to learn and became a noisy, busy refuge for displaced children and their families. The recapturing of the eastern part of the city left the biggest part of it in rubble and the schools were mostly destroyed or damaged. The overcrowded problem is still one of the main challenges for education in the city.

Many of the private schools closed as they were located on the outskirts in areas that saw heavy fighting. Several schools relocated or closed and more students started attending public schools.<sup>32</sup>

Another challenge the regime created was to introduce a new curriculum at a time when many experienced teachers decided to leave the country. The Ministry of Education introduced new course books in science, math, biology and English. Although most new teachers hired by the regime had a university degree or a diploma, they had not even studied the content of the new curriculum in high school or at university, let alone taught it.<sup>33</sup>

One last challenge remains is the trauma and the “toxic stress” students are suffering from along with the lack of experience among teachers in handling this problem. Although the bombing is over in the city, most of the schools in the eastern part are either destroyed or severely damaged. The challenge is how the new teachers in Aleppo, without sufficient training, will deal with traumatized students.



Source: Ammar Abu Alhour

## LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

### Comparing the Afghan Post-Conflict Experience to Aleppo Now

Conflicts each have their own dynamics and histories and therefore comparisons can be a problem. However, there are lessons to be learned from previous experiences of post-conflict environments outside of Syria.

Syria has not experienced the same conditions as Afghanistan, particularly as there has not been Taliban-style efforts to stop or limit the education of girls. “The number of girls is similar to the number of boys at the primary school level but there are significantly more girls than boys at the high school level.”<sup>34</sup> said Wissam Zarqa, who has taught at several high schools in eastern Aleppo and was the manager of The Institute of Language Studies. He also said that boys and girls drop out of school at similar rates.

However, there are a few important similarities to consider when thinking about the reconstruction of education in Aleppo.

In Afghanistan, there have been programs for Demilitarization, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR). One of the most important programs, Afghanistan’s New Beginnings Program (ANBP), was targeted at youth who were considered vulnerable victims to recruitment and as such a security threat.<sup>35</sup> This program has not succeeded for several reasons. First, UNICEF ran a similar program targeting child soldiers that placed more emphasis on the psychological aspect for those young soldiers. Consequently, there was a conflict between the two programs. Second, the ANBP program excluded some very important social aspects such as family acceptance of young soldiers after demilitarization.<sup>36</sup> Thirdly, the time between demilitarization and reintegration was only three weeks. Finally, the program did not address the former soldiers’ war experiences. As a result, this group did not continue its education and was considered to be a lost generation.<sup>37</sup>

This lesson from the Afghan experience is key. Although reintegration programs are very important, they should not conflict with similar programs run by different organizations. The second lesson is that we should consider the social context in which we implement our programs. When it comes to Aleppo, there are some similarities with Afghanistan. The first is ethnic marginalization. This can be applied to the Kurdish community. The situation for the Kurds is completely different now as they started at an early stage of the conflict to open language schools and create their own curriculum.<sup>38</sup> If this continues, it will create another gap and initiate another division in the city in terms of language, communication, and a lack of widespread agreement on the content of the curriculum.

According to several teachers in Aleppo, although the number of boys and girls was almost equal at the primary level, the number of girls was significantly higher at the middle and secondary levels. Male students dropped out of school to support their families. They mainly had three options. The first is to join a militia. Second, is to find a job.<sup>39</sup> As the second option was much more difficult than the first, most of these high school dropouts ended up fighting with armed rebel groups. The other choice is to leave the country.

## Comparing the Bosnian Post-Conflict Experience with Aleppo

The Bosnian experience is completely different in terms of how it evolved after the conflict. Before the war, Bosnia had three major ethnicities: Muslim Bosniak 43 per cent, Serbian Orthodox Christian 31 per cent and Croatian Catholic 17 per cent. All groups studied together in the same schools and used one language, Serbo-Croat.<sup>40</sup> After the conflict, there was a clear distinction in terms of the education system, curricula and languages used. Schools were divided ethnically and each ethnic group started using its own variant of the language to distinguish its cultural and national identity.<sup>41</sup> However, there are two interesting examples that might be helpful in providing insights for Aleppo's reconstruction.

### Culture of Religion Courses

Although people from different religions and ethnicities in Bosnia lived together and there was a high level of intermarriage, after the conflict, tension endured. This was encouraged by political parties representing religious and ethnic groups. Each group started teaching only its religion. The idea of a Culture of Religion course was first discussed in 2000 by the Office of the High Representative, the Goethe Institute, UNESCO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the ministries of education. The rationale of the course was to build tolerance among the different ethnicities and bring people together to be able to coexist in one society.<sup>42</sup> The course was piloted in 2004 and became mandatory in all schools. It did not replace religion classes, but helped to provide an insight into other religions that had been ignored before.

The course faced challenges in terms of teachers' training, the lack of experts to evaluate the course quality and sometimes even the lack of course books and supplementary teaching materials. However, it had positive outcomes. Teachers and students expressed satisfaction with the course and a higher level of tolerance and understanding of other religions and ethnicities was evident.<sup>43</sup>

Might such a course play a role in bringing the city of Aleppo together in a post-conflict era? Aleppo has diverse ethnic and religious minorities. Unfortunately, there are no courses in the Syrian curricula that teach about other religions or cultures. For example, the Kurdish language and culture was not taught at all in

Syrian schools. Although Armenians study Arabic and Syrian history books in their schools, non-Armenian students do not know about the Armenian language or culture. This also holds true for religion. Christian students do not learn about Islam and Muslim students do not learn about Christianity.

This did not cause troubles before the conflict in the city. People did not fight or argue over religion, but the lack of knowledge about other religions and ethnicities was present. The outcome of this policy is being displayed during the conflict. With the conflict in Syria, the social gap between the Kurdish community and other ethnicities has been expanding. Many Armenians left the city and went back to Armenia. Assad propaganda was to plant fear among other religious and ethnic groups by saying that the rebels were Muslim extremists or the conflict was a sectarian war.

### **Mostar Gymnasium**

The city of Mostar was clearly divided, with Bosniaks on the eastern side of the river and Croats on the western side. When the war came to an end, the two parts of the city continued teaching their own curricula.<sup>44</sup> In 2004, Mostar Gymnasium was reunited with both Bosniaks and Croats studying almost the same curriculum except for history, geography, language and religion. Two important aspects were present in the school. First, both Bosniak and Croat students studied in one school and had one administration which was a very important symbol of unity.<sup>45</sup> Second, sports played an important role in bringing students together. Students did not attend joint language and religious classes, but were able to play football and basketball in the school yard together.

Mostar Gymnasium was a very good tool for integration that brought different ethnicities together and helped the process of reconciliation through the discourse of education. Teachers and students said this model was effective in supporting the peace process. The Gymnasium's success encouraged other schools in Bosnia to follow the same approach.

Now, Aleppo has gone through a similar socio-ethnic and religious segregation that has not happened before in the city or the country. There were different kinds of curricula and school administration. Schools ran by NGOs received enough funds to have the revised version of the Syrian curriculum. Shehwaro said that NGO-managed schools "sometimes have funds to create a friendly learning atmosphere where the students can draw and have some toys to play with. They are able to promote concepts such as democracy and

freedom of speech through their administration.”<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, there are students who can only go to the mosque to memorise the Quran and study Arabic.

On the western side of the city, they still use very similar curriculum used at the underground schools in the east but the school administration is completely different. Students still do as they are told and cannot express their opinion inside or outside the classroom. As for the Kurdish part of the city, it uses its own curriculum and has its own school administration. This will need to be seriously considered to rebuild education in a comprehensive and inclusive way that can accommodate all socio-ethnic and religious groups.

Schools like al-Ma'moun, al-Ma'ari, Ibn Sina and many others hold historical and intellectual importance in the city. Some of them are still open as they are in the western part of the city. Others have closed. Fortunately, they have not been bombed. They used to attract students from all over the city before the conflict. Hopefully this role can be reactivated once the conflict is over.

Although sports play a very important role in the city of Aleppo, they were limited in schools before the conflict. There was only one session per week and students always asked for more. Increasing physical education and giving sports more weight in the curriculum, especially in the old schools that promoted diversity, can help bring the city back together.



Source: Al-Muthanna Ibn Haritha school

## POLICY PROBLEMS

Dealing with education when the country is in the midst of war is extremely difficult. Conflict has an obvious impact in terms of regular attendance, where children attend school, who teaches them and what they learn. With all the changes Aleppo has seen, any policy suggestions will face obstacles to implementation.

1. Security has played a major role in the eastern side of Aleppo preventing students from reaching their schools sometimes. Other times it prevents parents from sending their children to school out of fear. These fears persist even though the bombing of the city has stopped.
2. The lack of sufficient funding and resources of the schools in the eastern part of the city. This is shown in the small closed spaces used to teach and the quality of teachers employed in these schools.
3. The intervention of religious organizations that funded and promoted an Islamic agenda in eastern Aleppo underground schools and mosques has widened the divisions within the city.
4. The emergence of a new curriculum in the Kurdish part of the city will make the challenge of re-uniting the city more difficult, especially that Kurdish language and culture was not represented at all in the previous curricula.
5. On the other hand, the rapid development of the curriculum in west Aleppo does not correspond to the academic abilities and expertise in the city as most of the experienced teachers have left the country.
6. The big number of students in each classroom at schools in west Aleppo is still an issue because of the damage that reached schools and building in the east side.
7. Education in both parts of the city should be evolved around bringing the conflict into an end and bringing the city together after the conflict is over.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research this paper is presenting which includes the insights of many NGOs working on education, activists from Aleppo, teachers from both sides of the city and some parents, there are several policy recommendations regarding the education process and the curriculum policy makers should bear in mind. Some of these recommendations can be implemented now during the conflict and others can be considered now and implemented once the conflict is over. However, NGOs, donors and policy makers should start looking at education as a priority that should be tackled with long term policy and not as an emergency ad hoc policy.

The suggested policy recommendations to be implemented during the conflict are the following:

- 1- Make rebuilding schools a priority. The topic of reusing school buildings is controversial for many parents, NGOs and activists. So far, 4200 schools have been damaged all over the country.<sup>47</sup> The main concern comes from the fact that schools were specifically targeted by the regime and they do not trust the regime even if there is an agreement not to target schools. However, some school buildings in eastern Aleppo were newly built and have larger outdoor spaces and other facilities. In case they are still standing, they can be an alternative option to be used partially during the conflict and they are ready once the conflict is over.
- 2- Open more schools in eastern Aleppo if the population returns. Only about 150 schools, mostly in apartment buildings and basements, were operating in eastern Aleppo up till December 2016.<sup>48</sup> One of the biggest problems is that some schools have few students and many teachers while other schools might have many students and few teachers. With additional funds, the Ministry of Education needs to open new schools and relocate teachers, especially in east Aleppo. This would encourage parents to send children to schools near their houses and not have the only education option be to send only male children to the nearest mosque.
- 3- Relocate displaced families in western Aleppo from schools to homes. This could be a temporary solution as many have left their homes. This would help students and teachers in the west be more focused and enhance their quality of education.
- 4- Implement a teacher training program for new teachers. In addition to subject knowledge, teaching requires knowledge of classroom management, communication skills and how to create an engaging atmosphere where students can be part of the learning process. Unfortunately, the young new teachers do not have this experience and the Free Ministry of Education has not yet designed a program to address this gap.
- 5- Empower parents and students. This policy recommendation is suggested to give voice to both actors involved (teachers and families) in the education process. Since the conflict started the role of the parents has been quite passive. It is limited to accepting to send their children to schools or not. However, there has been a variety of changes in the school settings and the curriculum and neither the parents nor the students have a say in it. Unfortunately, there have not been any regular meetings with the parents to discuss the progress of their children or what their children are learning at schools. The parents meeting now can be a tool to bring people together and help the progress of the students with the support of their parents.
- 6- Psychological support training. All teachers on both sides of the city need children's psychological support courses (PSS). Most students who moved to the west from the east witnessed violence and destruction. Students in eastern Aleppo said that it became normal to live with destruction. PSS courses are very important for teachers and students, so the children do not develop a tolerance for violence and are able to reconnect to their lives as children and teenagers again. They are also suffering from mental health problems and "toxic stress".

## As for the recommendations that could be implemented once the conflict is over:

- 1- Design an inclusive and comprehensive curriculum: As the conflict continued in the city, the education gap among civilians increased. The differences between the regular curriculum and the revised one are mainly political and historical. Also, the changes in the revised curriculum were based on the decision of the coalition only. There was not a proper public discussion about these changes. The need to have an inclusive and comprehensive curriculum is quite urgent. Such a curriculum should be designed by Syrians for the whole population bearing in mind all the changes that are taking place during the conflict. Such a curriculum requires a public discussion and a public agreement on the content before it is designed.
- 2- Optional religion classes: Religion has taken on a greater salience in education since the conflict began. There has been an emphasis on more religion classes from some private donors and militias. This should be dealt with now. In Aleppo and most of the Syrian cities, people will not oppose teaching religion classes at schools (Islam and Christianity) but what policy makers can ask for is having these classes as optional ones. Teaching about the two religions in one course can be encouraged too. This will not send Christian students into a different class when there is a religion class and vice versa.
- 3- Centers for creative activities. Sports, especially football and music are important for the people of Aleppo. These two can work as instruments to bring people together once the conflict is over. Having music centers in eastern Aleppo and sports centers in western Aleppo, or vice versa, would encourage residents to visit the two separated parts of the city. Both activities require team work and the spirit of the community. This can help bring the social structure back into harmony after the conflict in the city is over. Sadly, some activists from western Aleppo have never been to the eastern side of the city before. Now more and more young people from both sides have not have the chance to see the other side of their own city. That is why having these public spaces in different parts in the city is very important.
- 4- “Culture of the Ethnicities” courses: Before the conflict, Armenian culture was limited to Armenian schools. Kurdish culture was not present at all. Also, Aleppo has several other minorities such as the Turkoman, Circassians and others. Having a mandatory course at primary school level and an elective course at secondary and high school level could provide a good introduction to different ethnic groups.
- 5- Design a program targeting teenagers and young adults: It has become popular in east Aleppo for high schools to have more female students. Male students have to either join the rebels or find a job to support their families. Those students cannot go to school right away once the conflict is over. The social acceptance aspect is something difficult to predict for the ones who are fighting now. Courses based on psychology and aim to re-integrating them in their communities and the society at large are essential.

- 6- 'Kurdish as a Second Language' courses: The latest development in the Kurdish part in Aleppo led to the use of a complete Kurdish curriculum in ash-Sheikh Maqsoud area. This curriculum can survive in the case of the emergence of a federal government. However, it might still be problematic to have two different curricula in the same city. Kurds in Aleppo constitute a significant minority and learning their language, which was not allowed before, should be implemented in the new curriculum. Neglecting this point might lead to another division in Aleppo once the conflict is over. Now having Kurdish as a mandatory second language or an elective one can be a subject for a public agreement all over the country.

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