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The Impact of the Syrian Civil War on its Education Sector

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Abstract

The Syrian Civil War, which started in 2011, has had destructive influences on the country, its civilians, and the region as a whole. This paper delves into the current status of the education sector in Syria and proposes potential policy recommendations to prevent the sector from a complete collapse. Through examining the current economic status in Syria, alongside the main negative impacts of the Syrian Civil war on the education sector, this paper argues for the necessity of collaboration between the Syrian government and international organizations by increasing funding, providing more resources, and increasing online learning modalities to strengthen the country's overall education system.

Keywords: Syria, Syrian Civil War, education Sector, international cooperation, international organizations, economic crisis, UNICEF, Syrian government, funding, collaboration, policy implications, brain drain, quality of Education, online Learning Modalities.

The Impact of the Syrian Civil War on its Education Sector

One of the most fundamental human rights protected by the United Nations is the right to education. It is an investment that equips individuals with the necessary skills and ideas that enable them to work, develop, and make a living. It is proven that education prevents people from falling into poverty and creates sustainable development around the world. Without a right to education, no other right is secured or achieved. Unfortunately, education has become a luxury in different regions of the world, and many children are left out of school for a variety of political, social, and cultural reasons. Approximately 244 million children and youth around the world do not attend school for various reasons (UNESCO, 2020). Children and youth are the ones affected by this problem the most.

Different factors, such as violent wars or natural disasters diminish the access of education and leave long-term marks on the population. The well-known Syrian Civil War is no different; the younger generation has been paying the price. The Syrian Civil War began on March 25, 2011 (Relations, 2023) and has been ongoing ever since. Even though a ceasefire agreement was reached on March 6, 2020, the country faces ongoing struggles to balance and recover from the major repercussions of the brutal nine year war. 90% of the Syrian population lives in poverty, and almost 5.5 million refugees are asylum seekers (Relations, 2023). The Syrian Civil War has created the largest refugee and displacement crisis in the modern era, affecting millions of people from Syria and those living in neighboring countries.

The Syrian Civil War has taken a devastating toll on its education sector. Migration is one of the main factors. Many students and professors have been fleeing the country for better opportunities and safety in other developed countries. Moreover, the infrastructure has been damaged by the long years of war and attacks, which have rendered schools non-functional. It is necessary to protect children's education and find ways to improve

educational access in the country. This paper will examine the status of the education sector in Syria and suggest potential policy solutions.

Background and Literature Review

The Syrian Civil War has severely aggravated the Syrian economy, making it a difficult country to live in. Whether that is the drop in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) levels, inflation of prices, disruptions in foreign trade, domestic and external shocks, or other macroeconomic factors, the economy is in a decline with no end in sight.

It is public knowledge that Syria's struggling economy is the country's biggest problem, despite regional and international political tensions. The 2023 World Bank Report (World Bank, 2023) on Syria stated that the country's real GDP is expected to decrease by 3.2% in 2023, following a 3.5% decline in 2022. Similarly, inflation is expected to increase from 44% to 60% because of the many contractions in consumption and high costs (Bank, 2023). The dire economic situation has mainly resulted from the civil war. However, external factors such as the Ukraine War, the economic crisis in neighboring countries like Lebanon, the 2023 earthquakes, and the many sanctions issued by countries in the West have made the situation even worse.

This war has also affected trade and foreign investment in the country. A 2023 report (World Bank, 2023) showed that exports from Syria decreased from \$18.4 billion in 2010 to \$1.8 billion in 2021, and imports declined from \$22.7 billion in 2010 to \$6.5 billion in 2021 (World Bank, 2023). The long years of war and sanctions have disrupted many industries in the country, such as the agricultural industry, leading to the results above.

The Syrian currency, the Syrian Pound, has depreciated by 48% percent (World Bank, 2023) since the start of the war. This increase has triggered inflation in the country and high costs of transactions with other countries. It is also important to mention that the global

inflation occurring now has also affected and increased prices in the country, showcasing once again the intricate relationship between domestic and global policy.

Syria's inflation, calculated with the consumer price index, has increased from 18.0% in 2017 to 44.0% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). Similarly, the country's fiscal plan is expected to increase the budget deficit from 4.1 trillion SYP (Syrian Pound) in 2022 to 4.9 trillion SYP in 2023 (World Bank, 2023). The budget deficit and the lack of funding from the international audience have affected the many different sectors in the country and have made the situation worse.

The Syrian civil war has had long-term impacts on many sectors in the country and on its people. As time has passed, the consequences of these realities have revealed themselves in a real and tangible way. The education sector is one of the sectors being affected the most. A general report on Syria by UNICEF showed that approximately 2.4 million Syrian children do not attend school, while around 1.6 million (UNICEF, 2023) are on the verge of dropping out. These numbers are increasing year by year. Additionally, one in three schools are not accessible due to damage and destruction (UNICEF, Syria Education, 2023). Finally, the budget allocated for education has declined by 78% (UNICEF, 2023) since 2011. These are alarming numbers that showcase how negative the impact of the Syrian Civil War has been on the education sector. Moreover, The United Nations has confirmed that there have been approximately 700 attacks (UNICEF, 2021) on schools, teachers, and other educational institutions in Syria since the major violence began in the country.

A literature review was conducted for the purpose of identifying the alarming situation of the education sector in Syria and the reasons behind it. Academic studies and reports from prominent international organizations and agencies, including UNICEF, UNESCO, ACU, and the International Rescue Committee, are the main sources of information for this case study. The IRC conducted an Annual State of Education Assessment

in 2016 (IRC, 2017) on a sample of 2,846 students from 5 schools in Idlib, Syria. Another academic report by Oudai Tozan (Tozan, 2023) from the University of Cambridge conducted systematic research in 2022. Additionally, another academic report by Sansom Milton (Milton, 2019) from the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha, Qatar conducted quantitative and qualitative research by interviewing 10 Syrian students and performing thorough research on the matter in 2019.

The descriptive data showed that there is generally an absence of data and research conducted by English-speaking researchers on the topic of education and the Syrian Civil War. The literature review identified 3 main negative impacts on the education sector in Syria. These barriers are briefly described in the next few pages.

Low Quality of Education

The Annual State of Education report funded and conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC, 2017) in 2016 sampled 2,846 students from five schools in Idlib (a city on the Northwest side of Syria), out of which 1,255 were boys and the other 1,591 girls. The results found were alarming. In terms of reading, 59% of 6th graders were unable to read 2nd-grade equivalent reading material. Similarly, 52% of 7th graders and 35% of 8th graders were unable to do so. In terms of Math, 64% of 6th graders were unable to perform a simple subtraction problem that is usually solved in the second grade. Similarly, 63% of 7th graders and 46% of 8th graders were also unable to perform them (IRC, 2017). The results of this report are a reflection of the devastating state of the education sector in Syria.

This same Education report assessment was conducted on a smaller sample (IRC, 2017) of 122 students in 2015 from 2 schools in Idlib, showing that 79% of the students in the 4th, 5th, and 6th-grade classes were unable to read second-grade level reading material. Additionally, 71% of them were unable to perform basic math functions. Even though some

of the numbers have decreased within a year after the intervention of IRC, the results are still concerningly low (IRC, 2017).

A research report (Schools in Syria, 2023) about the status of schools in Syria was conducted in 2023 and funded by the Ministry of the Government of France that covers foreign relations to assess the education sector in the country during the 2022-2023 academic year. The research used a sample of 4,066 schools in Syria from different districts and governorates (Schools in Syria, 2023). The research found that 4 different curriculums are currently being taught in Syria, which is a major issue and the main reason why the educational system has many gaps. Furthermore, some schools use two different curriculums, which presents more issues. The research also found that only 28% of the schools had finished the curriculum during the last academic year, and about 60% of the schools had only taught 26% to 50% of the curriculum (Schools in Syria, 2023).

The academic research by Tozan (2023) also discusses the low quality of education in Syria, specifically in the higher education sector. He stated that many of the curriculums were found to be lacking and outdated in many areas. Tozan argued that the decline in the quality of education could result in a decrease in standards by the government. Moreover, he argued that many students were found to be incapable of performing basic calculations, were unmotivated, and were marking poor attendance.

Brain Drain

One of the other major negative impacts of the Syrian Civil War on the education sector is brain drain, the emigration of intellectuals from a certain country. It is not a surprise that whenever a conflict is involved, many people run away and migrate to safer places that offer more opportunities and resources. The Syrian civil war was no different: more than half of the population of Syria has left the country, and millions have become refugees in countries close by (Relations, 2023).

The academic article by Tozan (2023) mentioned brain drain as one of the most severe outcomes of the Syrian civil war, stating that academics and professionals left Syria during the war. However, he argued that there was not enough information regarding the effects of brain drain on education in Syria. The study found that many universities were employing under qualified professors to fill in the gaps or even raising the retirement age for professors. He also stated that the Syrian government has decreased scholarship offerings for students to study abroad and later return home to teach. This has negatively impacted and discouraged students from pursuing higher degrees and/or returning to Syria. This factor alone shows that no effort from the government is being made to improve the quality of education in the country.

Another academic research by Sansom Milton (Milton, 2019) considered brain drain to be one of the most damaging consequences on the quality of education in Syria. Based on the interviews he performed, one student mentioned that until the year 2013, the educational system was not as impacted as other sectors since most teachers had not fled the country. Sahar al Fahoum, Minister of Higher Education, stated that “14% of teaching faculty resigned or were dismissed” (Enab Baladi, 2016). Moreover, according to official sources, the country lost almost one-third of its high-level educators in 2015 (Enab Baladi, 2016).

Many of the highly skilled and well-equipped professors migrated to countries like Russia or Western countries since they were offered better opportunities for living and higher incomes. This is why many of the universities, the research stated, raised the retirement age from 60 to 70. That, in turn, lowered the quality of education being taught in schools. The report also discussed the School of Architecture at Damascus University, stating that at present, there are 5 or 6 professors who teach all cohorts and that graduate-level students are often chosen to teach freshman and sophomore level classes (Milton, 2019).

Lack of Resources

Another main impact of the Syrian Civil War on the education sector in the country is the lack of resources. Syria has witnessed a multitude of bombings and casualties that have resulted in the loss of human and physical capital. Whether that's losing students, highly skilled teachers, or losing infrastructure that was once a beacon of hope for younger generations.

The academic report by Tozan (2023) found the lack of resources as one of the other impacts of the war on the education sector. He stated that the economic crisis in the country and the reallocation of funds from educational institutions to war efforts have led to a decline in the sector. He stated that many of the educational institutions have been facing constraints in their budget resulting from insufficient funding. It is understandable that in times of crisis, saving human lives is a priority; however, to ensure sustainable development, it is important to fund schools. In addition, many of the schools do not have the necessary capital, whether that's chairs, whiteboards, laptops, or anything else that is required to make the facilities functional.

An article published by the Harvard International Review (Bouchane, 2016) discusses the lack of funding for the education sector in Syria. For instance, around \$178.3 million USD in education funding requests were unmet in 2015 (Bouchane, 2016). The article further states that many organizations that used to fund education have been decreasing their funds, blaming the financial crisis in the country.

A 2016 UNDP report measured the cost of the destruction of infrastructure to be around \$67.3 billion. (World Bank Blogs, 2017). A 2023 Syria Economic Monitor Report also measured that the total damages in Syrian cities range between \$8.7 billion to \$11.4 billion (Bank, 2023). In addition to the lack of funding, water scarcity and fuel shortages in

the country have also weakened many industries and have made transportation and other kinds of services unmanageable, overburdening school directors and board members.

As previously mentioned, many organizations have blamed the economic crisis in Syria as the main reason for decreased funding. Despite the high need for assistance and funding in the country, according to a 2023 World Bank report, humanitarian donor funding marked its lowest year in 2022. It is no secret that the war in Syria has had devastating and alarming effects on the economy and the financial sector. The Syrian Civil War had a demonstrated negative impact on the country's economy, which in turn negatively impacted the education sector.

Possible Solutions

The Syrian Civil War has created a critical situation in the country, so it should be dealt with strategically to prevent further decline in the sector. Strong alternatives and policy recommendations should be adapted to tackle and mitigate the issue.

Increase Funding

The international community should increase its funding to help the government of Syria and the private sector deal with the conflict and mitigate the crisis in the education sector. It is important to note that one of the biggest effects of the Syrian Civil War is on the economy. The economy is the main reason many sectors are declining and failing in the country. Based on many discussions with Syrians over the past few years, the well-equipped teachers and the educated still residing in Syria have been leaving their jobs and working in different international organizations and NGOs that provide 8% to 10% higher incomes than other regular teachers get in schools. The payroll system in Syria is established and controlled by the Syrian government. Therefore, the private sector cannot choose salaries or change them. However, with the struggling economy, it is only natural that the Syrian government is allocating less money to the education sector; amplifying the effect of brain drain.

The topic of brain drain is commonly discussed in times of conflict and is usually focused on the people leaving the country. However, it is important to mention that brain drain is also an internal issue, as the educated audience is struggling to make a living and is experiencing exhaustion. The only way brain drain within the country could be mitigated is through increasing incentives for the teachers. The best incentive is higher salaries. Therefore, with more funding, the budget of the government will increase, and more allocation of funds to the education sector will be possible, leading to higher salaries and benefits for teachers.

Funding is also essential for research purposes. Through the literature review and the secondary research, data deprivation is a big barrier and difficulty faced by all researchers. Many third-world countries do not have the funds to measure and perform calculations to acquire data about the countries. Moreover, they do not have the means to perform the measurements due to the lack of funding. Much of the data found in conflict-affected areas is also outdated or performed in the national language, which in this case is Arabic. To have a clear understanding and contextualize the situation and impact of the Syrian Civil War, it is important to have clear and timely data. Having clear data will assist in assessing the priorities, allocating the funds, and increasing efforts to pitch investors for more funding.

A number of resources are scarce in the Middle East, and they are getting scarcer with time. Yet, creativity, zeal, and change have been anything but scarce. The former Director General of the International Organization for Migration states, “The Syrian people and their host communities have shown remarkable resistance throughout this conflict. They are in need of continuous financial support and solidarity from the international community.” (IOM, 2023).

Improve Collaboration

Collaborative efforts among international organizations to assist in rehabilitating schools, training and preparing future teachers, and providing supplies should be improved. It is not a surprise that the biggest group being impacted by the war has been the Syrian people. They have been the ones who have been enduring the most struggle, the most uncertainty, and the most loss. Additionally, international organizations and other NGOs have always been a beacon of hope in conflict-affected areas, as they prioritize humanity and are action-oriented.

Having a strong relationship with the international community through different organizations can improve the education sector for the coming generations. The funds that international organizations have can be used to rehabilitate schools or other educational institutions that have been damaged by the war. Having a school that is well-running and equipped with the necessary materials will enable students to have a sustainable day-to-day school life. Schools must become a safe haven for students in times of conflict; without having the basic services and stable infrastructure, that would be impossible to achieve. International Organizations can play a significant role in that. Collaborations can also create opportunities for teachers to be equipped with the necessary skills to teach during these difficult times. This training may include crisis-related sessions, sessions related to the psychology of a student, or a skill or software that a teacher might use to improve the quality of education in the country and/or create a strong generation of future leaders of the country.

Organizations such as UNICEF have already been making efforts in this regard, as they have been actively involved in the Syrian Civil War response strategy. UNICEF's 2023 goal is to have 37,000 (UNICEF, 2023) teachers and education personnel trained so that they have the necessary skills to teach their students.

International Organizations can also help provide school supplies to teachers and students, whether they are books for students to use or other aids for teachers to use, such as audio-visual supplies, laptops, and chairs. UNICEF's 2023 goal is to support 2.6 million children (UNICEF, 2023) with the necessary supplies and services to have a formal education.

Another important aspect of this recommendation could be strengthening partnerships with other Arab countries to stabilize the security and general economy of the region. Many Syrian refugees settled in countries like Jordan and Lebanon, which is why it is important to ensure that all Syrians have equal opportunities to obtain quality education.

Explore Online Learning Modalities

Distance learning is a common tool used by different organizations and governments to train teachers and is found to be a great way to stabilize the educational system. Different distance learning modalities have been implemented in various countries, specifically conflict-affected countries, through audio, video, phone calls, and other online modalities (Delivering Distance Learning in Emergencies, 2020). The results have been found to be successful.

One successful example of the implementation of distance learning was found in the country of Zanzibar in the year 2010, where the Ministry of Education, through USAID funding, was able to implement a distance learning online program specifically designed for elementary-level teachers, equipping them with necessary skills, tools, and knowledge to teach students in times of emergency (Delivering Distance Learning in Emergencies, 2020). Through the distance learning program, teachers are provided with materials and textbooks, as well as videos and different activities they can follow to learn and practice. The material and videos are prepared by skilled teachers from developed countries who have had the necessary training, knowledge, and experience to develop a curriculum.

The culture of online learning has become more common since COVID, as many schools and communities have adopted online modalities. This new trend is relevant and could be useful to countries like Syria, which will seek to make the most of their time, especially since the conflict remains unsettled.

Organizations and agencies such as UNICEF and USAID, which already have the resources to train and design programs specifically for Syria, not to mention their years of experience in this matter, could truly mitigate issues and save the education sector in Syria. Online learning services could also target communities and minority groups that are usually excluded from learning, such as people who are disabled, the elderly, or women. Online learning opens doors to the whole population of the country, strengthening its human capital and economy.

Conclusion

In times of crisis, it is important to separate people from their governments and to prioritize their well-being when writing and implementing policies. The Syrian Civil War has had many devastating consequences, but the negative impact that it has left on the people is the most devastating one. Education is the foundation for and the most important aspect of success. People will not succeed in life if they do not have the necessary skills, knowledge, and tools. Countries will not succeed if they do not have stable human talent, resources, capital, and well-functioning sectors.

Throughout this case study, the overall economic situation was described, focusing most importantly on the negative impacts and the barriers that the education sector in Syria has been facing since the start of the Syrian Civil War. The situation will only get worse as years pass. Therefore, it is essential that international organizations collaborate with Syrian communities and the government to mitigate the problem as much as they can.

Mitigation efforts could include increasing funding for organizations, governments, and schools, improving collaboration with different organizations and agencies to rehabilitate, train, and provide resources to communities that have endured the most damage and loss, and finally, increasing online learning modalities so that the whole population can benefit from and strengthen the country's overall education.

Prioritizing education will ensure the stability of the country and open doors to recovery and a sustainable future. A strong country has the human capital to make strategic decisions that will innovate, invest, make a profit out of the resources available, and manage the budget and the finances of the country well. If one country's economy suffers, the economy of the neighboring countries, and ultimately the world, will also suffer. Therefore, for the sake of the Syrian people and the sake of the global economy, communities and different sectors like education should be saved and prioritized.

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