

Uncertain hope for a good future

by Karin Leukefeld,* Germany/Syria



Karin Leukefeld
(Photo ma)

Crises and wars in the Middle East undermine the right to education. Aleppo, June 2024: The school year is coming to an end. Before the long summer holidays, pupils in Syria are preparing for their exams. For the older ones, it's about the university entrance, the Baccalauréat, for the others

it's about the end-of-year certificates. The centralised school system is a relic from the time of the French mandate (1920-1946), which the Syrians, like the Lebanese, have retained. In other parts of the Arab world, which were defined by the British Mandate or – after the Second World War – by the USA, the British or US school systems prevail.

In the countries of the Middle East, a good education for children is a “must” for families. Paving the way for a better future for children with good schooling and education is the purpose of life and the task of parents. However, ongoing crises, sanctions, economic problems, wars and threats of war deprive young people in the affected countries of their right to safety, health and education.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, the exams for around 3,000 pupils from southern Lebanon had to take place under the protection of the Lebanese armed forces in school facilities in the interior of the country at

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the end of June. Those involved reported that Israeli fighter jets flew low over the examination centres during the exams to intimidate people.

Around 90,000 people have been evacuated from southern Lebanon since October 2023 due to the ongoing mutual attacks by Hezbollah and Israel. Schooling for children and young people has come to a standstill. While Hezbollah attacks military bases, launch pads and surveillance facilities of the Israeli armed forces, Israel also attacks agricultural areas and residential buildings in the interior of Lebanon. According to Hezbollah, the weapons could fall silent immediately if a ceasefire is reached in the war against Gaza. However, the ceasefire is making no progress and Israel has repeatedly declared in recent weeks that it will now bomb Lebanon “into the Stone Age”.

Gaza Strip

In the Gaza Strip, the United Nations, associations of universities and academics worldwide are talking about “educide”, the systematic destruction of education for the societies affected. The English term is made up of “education” and “genocide”, the mass destruction (of people). The situation in the Gaza Strip since the start of the Israeli war almost nine months ago and the silence of Western governments, which continue to support Israel with weapons, equipment, ammunition and military intelligence, is being commented on with horror.

The English-language Internet portal *University World News*, a “global window on higher education”, sharply criticises the Israeli attacks on universities in the Gaza Strip and the “complete destruction of the education system in Gaza”. By the start of the war, (as of 27 February 2024), 23,000 teachers and professors had taught more than 625,000 students at the seven universities, according to the report.

4327 students and 231 teachers, professors and staff were killed. The massive destruction of schools, the partial and complete destruction of universities is, if one follows the language of the Genocide Convention, a form of “educide”, a

complete and partial destruction of the education system in the Gaza Strip.

In April 2024, the UN children's aid organisation UNICEF pointed out that eight out of ten schools (76 per cent) in the Gaza Strip had been completely or partially destroyed; 620,000 pupils were no longer able to attend classes. The attacks on educational institutions not only destroyed teaching, but also "undermine the basis for sustainable social growth and development", said *Talal al-Hathal*, Director of the "Education Above All" Foundation in Doha (Qatar).

Syria

Despite many problems, most pupils in Syria can take their final exams. It seems that all forces are being mobilised to support the children during the exam period. Parents are concerned that their offspring have good learning conditions to prepare for the exams. The examinees themselves are tense and attend the courses offered by the schools or, if the parents can afford it, private teachers to overcome uncertainties in the subject matter. A lack of electricity and the enormous heat this June pose a major challenge for everyone involved.

The exam days begin with a kind of state of emergency. The internet is switched off for several hours early in the morning across the country. The drastic measure is justified by the fact that the examination papers for all examination subjects are created centrally and sent to the examination centres via the Internet on each examination day. To ensure that nobody can obtain information about the examination questions by any means whatsoever, the internet remains switched off for the general public on these days from 6:00 am until 10:00 or even 11:00 am.

The Syrian school system is not recognised in Idlib and the north-east

Examinations cannot be held in Idlib and north-east Syria. Both the dogmatic Islamists of *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), who control Idlib, and the Kurdish-led *Autonomous Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria* (AANES), do not recognise the Syrian school system and are preventing the exams from taking place.

In Aleppo, the education directorate of the provincial authority has been organising for years that pupils from these areas can come to Aleppo. *Mustafa Abdul Ghani*, head of the educa-



Mustafa Abdul Ghani heads the education directorate in Aleppo. (All pictures© Karin Leukefeld)

tion directorate, reports that pupils are offered the opportunity to spend two to three weeks in Aleppo to prepare for the exams and then take them in Aleppo. "The autonomous authority in the north-east – which cooperates with the Syrian authorities in various ways – allows the students to travel to Aleppo or Deir Ez-Zor so that they can take part in the central final exams," says Abdul Ghani in an interview with the author in Aleppo. "But the Islamists won't give the students permission, block the roads to Aleppo and carry out checks." The certificates and final grades are important for the young people because the Syrian school system is internationally recognised. It is not known what qualifications the children in the areas outside of government control will receive.

The Education Directorate in Aleppo offers the students transport, accommodation and food, electricity, water and psychological help to prepare for the exams in Aleppo, says Abdul Ghani. Forty-five schools and other facilities have been prepared for the accommodation and school materials and books have been provided. Teachers have taken over the supervision and support. The UN Children's Fund UNICEF is providing support, although not as much as in previous years, he says. Most of the help comes from Syrian private and public aid organisations.

To take part in the exams, the children "have to be 15 years old and register with an identity card and their school reports". This year, 9500 pupils from areas not controlled by the Syrian government have travelled to Aleppo. More than 200 students even came from Idlib on their own initiative. "They used the crossing at Khan Scheikhun; aid organisations organised and financed the transport." 7200 of the students were



Teamwork and more for success. Teacher Fatima al-Kurdi in the entrance hall of a school in Masaken Hanano.

accommodated in public schools, while the others stayed with relatives during the exams.

Mustafa Abdul Ghani and Osama Sorour from the Ministry of Education (Damascus), who oversees the exams in Aleppo, accompany the author to Masaken Hanano on the outskirts of Aleppo. Two of the schools where the candidates are accommodated are located there. There are girls in one school and boys in the other. There are many drawings in the entrance area and in the corridors, which are intended to familiarise the children with the meaning and aim of school lessons and learning. "Concept, skills, strategy, profit, hard work, renewal, teamwork" is written in circles arranged around a light bulb symbolising "success".

Pupils live and learn in the classrooms, which are furnished with cupboards, mattresses, chairs and desks. There are bathrooms in every corridor and the children receive vouchers to buy food. In previous years, food prepared by private aid organisations was distributed, but this year there is no money for this, explains Mr Abdul Ghani. The boys and girls come from villages and small towns in the rural areas of Idlib, Hama and Aleppo. The pupils at the two schools in Masaken Hanano come from the north-east of Aleppo, from Ain Arab/Kobane, Manbij, Jaraboulus and Al Bab.

There are no exams on this day and the young people are preparing for the next exams in small groups or with teachers. A group of girls from Ain Arab/Kobané first had to brush up on their Arabic. The Kurdish autonomous authority has abolished Arabic in schools and lessons are now only held in Kurdish, mostly Kurmanci. Nevertheless, the Arabic language is still part of everyday life for the population. One of the pupils is ac-



A group of girls comes from Jaraboulus, which lies on the Syrian-Turkish border and is controlled by Turkish-backed Islamist militias.

companied by her grandmother, who lives in the classroom with the girls. She wanted to stay with her granddaughter by all means, says teacher al-Kurdi. Most of the girls interviewed want to become pharmacists. The profession of teacher is not very popular, says teacher Fatima al-Kurdi, who supervises the girls' accommodation. She says this with a wink, and the girls laugh.

In the school where the boys are housed, a teacher is currently cramming math's. In another classroom, three older boys are preparing for their A-levels. Two of them come from Manbij and Ain Arab/Kobane. The third pupil says he comes from Raqqa. However, his family lives in Manbij because Raqqa was completely destroyed. He wants to study business administration so that he can take over his father's business later, says the pupil. He will not leave Syria under any circumstances. His two fellow pupils are planning to study IT engineering and medicine after their A-levels. They are thinking about leaving Syria, but it is unclear how and where.



Pupils from Ain Arab/Kobane first have to brush up on their Arabic. A grandmother (centre) accompanies her granddaughter.



Osama Sorour (2nd from left) from the Ministry of Education supervises the exams.

Many young men have left Syria in recent years because they did not want to serve in the Syrian army or be recruited by the various armed groups for the war. The declaration by the Syrian Ministry of Defence (end of June 2024) that recruits and reservists will be discharged from military service by the end of the year and that the duration of compulsory military service for young men will be revised has brought a sigh of relief in Syria, especially among families.

Math's lessons have now finished, and the boys gather curiously in the corridor to question the foreign journalist. "Take me to Germany with you," says a pupil with red hair and freckles. They

all love German football and want to know what school is like in Germany. While Mustafa Abdul Ghani withdraws for one-on-one conversations with some of the boys, Osama Sorour follows the exchange between the boys and the author with interest. Finally, photos and selfies are taken with the German journalist before the boys are called together for the next lesson.

It is difficult for Syrian youth to imagine a future in Syria, says Osama Sorour. The problems are huge, and the war has changed everything. "Our task is to give the children the best education. Good certificates can pave their way into the future."

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Thumbs up:

The pupils hope for a good report card for the future.