

Basement schools aid many children in war-ravaged Syrian city of Douma

By Al Jazeera, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.06.18

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Syrian children attend a class in one of the underground rooms of the Al-Hayat school in Damascus' al-Qaboun suburb on October 19, 2016. After the Al-Hayat school was targeted in government air strikes on November 5, 2014, resulting in the death of more than a dozen students, the school moved to an underground location. Photo by: AFP/Sameer Al-Doumy/Getty Images

Alaa al-Khamooneh is a math teacher in Douma, Syria. Douma is the largest city in an area called eastern Ghouta, to the northeast of Syria's capital city, Damascus. Khamooneh was forced to take his teaching underground in the last month to avoid bombs and attacks from airplanes and drones.

The attacks were coming from the Syrian and Russian governments. It may sound strange that Syria's own government would attack a Syrian city. Syria is in a civil war, though. A civil war is a war fought by different sides within one country. Eastern Ghouta has been under control by rebel groups for much of Syria's eight-year civil war. The Syrian government wants to take it back.

As the war continues, the 35-year-old Khamooneh has been part of a teaching program that aims to provide the appearance of normality for schoolchildren.

Many residents have taken to living mostly in underground basements or temporary shelters. This is how they escape attacks from warplanes, which to date have killed at least 1,644 people living in the area.

Khamooneh said teachers continue to teach to distract children from the violence around them.

"It was a way to change what their day-to-day lives have become, from counting explosions to constant crying in fear," he said.

Stressful Times For Children

Many of the students suffer from nightmares and panic attacks, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder which will have a bad effect on their lives if left untreated, Khamooneh explained. Post-traumatic stress disorder, often called PTSD, is a condition experienced by people after witnessing or experiencing a life-threatening event.

"We are trying to tackle this problem with what little resources we have," he said. Sometimes the students talk about their problems, other times they paint.

The basement schools were organized in February by teachers in Douma. It became too risky to carry on lessons in school buildings.

This has been the case since 2014, when schools became targeted by Syrian government forces, said Adnan Alwan. Alwan is a teacher involved in the project.

Out of Douma's 31 schools, six were totally destroyed during Syria's eight-year conflict, and 15 others were partially damaged, Alwan said.

3,500 Kids Taught In Basement Schools

The project runs approximately 48 basement schools in Douma, with an attendance of 3,500 students, and receives most of its support and limited supplies from their parents. In total, 96 teachers are part of the program, or two teachers to each basement school.

"This is all completely volunteer work by Douma's teachers to help and support the children," Alwan said.

The conditions of these basement schools are far from ideal or safe. Alwan describes them as resembling a prison.

These spaces lack desks and tables, and instead children sit on blankets or worn out carpets. Electricity is provided by battery-operated lights.

Despite the basement schools' best efforts to continue with the education of students, Khamooneh said residents still fear the targeting of shelters and basements by warplanes.

Living In A War Zone

An attack on a basement school in nearby Irbin killed at least 16 children and four women in late March.

Sarah Hajkarem, age 11, lives with her parents and two younger brothers in one of the underground shelters.

"We have been here in the dark for more than a month," she said. "I miss the sun and playing in the streets after school."

The shelter also doubles as a basement school, but Sarah said she had difficulty focusing during the sessions because "the bombs didn't stop falling."

"We can barely see what the teacher is writing, and we can't write as there aren't enough pens and notebooks for everyone," she said.

The basement is full of Sarah's neighbors, who all have only have one meal a day.

"I Want To Be Able To Go ... Play Outside"

Sarah wishes life would go back to normal.

"I want to be able to go to a proper school again, play outside with my friends and have food, water and be able to shower every day," she said. "My mother said we will have all that soon."

Eastern Ghouta lies 9 miles east of the capital Damascus. It has been under attack by the Syrian government since mid-2013 after groups that oppose the government took control.

In the past few days, the situation has quieted down after opposition groups signed Russian-brokered agreements with the Syrian government.

The deals allow for rebel fighters and ordinary people to leave. They are allowed to go to Idlib province in northwestern Syria, one of the last areas under opposition control.

As many as 100,000 residents have left Ghouta to either government or opposition-controlled areas since the agreements were signed.

Uncertain Future For Residents

The future remains uncertain for residents choosing to remain in Ghouta. They will face a new situation under the control of the Syrian government.

The war has entered its eighth year and has had a terrible effect on the population. More than 450,000 people have been killed and an estimated 11 million people have fled their homes.

For Khamooneh, the basement schools are supposed to be only temporary. He hopes that a brighter future will follow.

"We are doing our best for the next generation and we hope that they will have a better future," he said.