

SYRIA

*Schools were attacked in numerous locations. By early 2013, up to 1,000 schools had allegedly been used as detention or torture centres and 2,445 were reported damaged or destroyed, although it is not known how many were targeted. Attacks on universities caused very heavy casualties.*¹⁵³¹

CONTEXT

Tensions rose in Syria beginning in March 2011. Some of the first protests were sparked by the arrest and torture of 15 boys who painted revolutionary slogans on their school wall. After security forces killed several protesters, more took to the streets, calling for President Bashar al-Assad to step down.¹⁵³² By July 2011, hundreds of thousands of people were demonstrating across the country.¹⁵³³ Security forces clamped down, targeting specific groups, including schoolchildren and students. During 2011 and 2012, the government gradually lost control of parts of the country to the Free Syrian Army and other groups including the Al-Nusra Front. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, continuing conflict had left more than 125,000 people dead by December 2013.¹⁵³⁴ Bombings, killings, targeted attacks, arbitrary arrests, torture, abductions and sexual violence led to large-scale displacement of people and an unfolding humanitarian disaster.¹⁵³⁵

Education was hit hard by the war. Net primary enrolment in 2011, the year the conflict began, was 93 per cent,¹⁵³⁶ net secondary enrolment was 68 per cent,¹⁵³⁷ gross tertiary enrolment was 26 per cent¹⁵³⁸ and adult literacy was 84 per cent.¹⁵³⁹ The UN reported in April 2013 that an estimated 2,445 of the country's 22,000 schools were damaged or destroyed and 1,889 were being used as IDP shelters instead of for educational purposes.¹⁵⁴⁰ Some 69 of

118 UNRWA schools for Palestinian refugees were also closed.¹⁵⁴¹ A report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, based in London, said 450 schools had been completely destroyed.¹⁵⁴² By September 2013, almost two million children aged 6 to 15 had dropped out of school because of conflict and displacement.¹⁵⁴³

The Assad regime kept tight control over the education system. The Ba'ath party had a security unit monitoring student activities at every university. Students had no right to form an association, join a protest or speak out in public; and university appointments were controlled by the Ba'ath party.¹⁵⁴⁴ The Syrian government prevented teachers from expressing ideas contrary to government policy and prohibited the teaching of the Kurdish language.¹⁵⁴⁵

ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

In reports by media and human rights sources, including video evidence and eyewitness accounts of individual attacks on schools, details were given of at least 10 incidents of schools being destroyed or partially destroyed in attacks in 2012.¹⁵⁴⁶ The schools were attacked by forces on both sides of the conflict,¹⁵⁴⁷ with some being hit by rockets and others by shelling or air strikes. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (15 July 2012 to 15 January 2013) documented government attacks on more than 17 schools in its 5 February 2013 report and noted that in some cases anti-government forces were present at the schools at the time of attack.¹⁵⁴⁸

Although it is hard to determine from reports how many of the destroyed and damaged schools were specifically targeted, there is evidence that some were deliberately attacked. The UN reported that government forces looted and set fire to schools on several occasions in 2011 in retribution for student

protests.¹⁵⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch reported in mid-2013 that Syrian armed forces launched ground and air attacks on schools that were not being used by combatants. It said that Syrian forces fired on schools while classes were going on inside them, using automatic weapons and tanks, and Syrian fighter jets and helicopters dropped bombs and incendiary weapons on school buildings when no opposition forces were in or near them, according to witnesses.¹⁵⁵⁰

In its 2013 report *Safe no more: Students and schools under attack in Syria*, Human Rights Watch reported that one 14-year-old girl called Salma and fellow students in Dael, Daraa governorate, hid under their desks for protection when a tank entered their school and sprayed the walls with machine gun fire in an incident which took place between 19 July and 18 August 2012. Video footage viewed by arms experts at Human Rights Watch appeared to support her account of the attack. A soldier who defected from the Syrian army reported that he saw a plane and a tank attack Shaba'a High School in the suburbs of Damascus on the first day of the school year in September 2012, causing serious damage and injuring students. Human Rights Watch also documented an airstrike in Al-Bab, Aleppo governorate, on 4 November 2012, in which four bombs struck the school while it was hosting a civilian council, killing the head of the council. Another witness reported that seven bombs dropped by MiG fighters hit the playground in Ghaleb Radi school, Quseir, Homs governorate, on 3 December 2012, releasing white smoke. Video footage suggested they were incendiary bombs.¹⁵⁵¹

ATTACKS ON SCHOOL STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND OTHER EDUCATION PERSONNEL

Schoolchildren were frequently killed when schools were targeted for attack or were damaged as a

result of collateral damage: in 2012, nine were killed in their schoolyard in an alleged cluster bomb attack on Deir al-Asafir,¹⁵⁵² and nine students and a teacher were killed in a mortar attack on Al-Batiha school, Damascus for example.¹⁵⁵³

Students were arrested, detained, tortured and killed for their participation in protests that took place in schools.¹⁵⁵⁴ Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that security forces entered schools in Daraa, Homs and the Damascus suburbs to collect intelligence on students and their families, or they employed school staff to conduct interrogations.¹⁵⁵⁵ Security forces and pro-government militias used excessive force and even gunfire against peaceful demonstrations at three schools, according to Human Rights Watch.¹⁵⁵⁶

The UN received information that in May 2012 government forces allegedly raided the local primary school in As Safira, Aleppo governorate, taking hostage 30 boys and 25 girls between 10 and 13 years of age. The forces used the children as human shields by walking them in front of their forces to clear out a local Free Syrian Army unit that had recently gained control of the town.¹⁵⁵⁷

UN figures suggest that by the end of February 2013, a total of 167 education personnel, including 69 teachers, were reported to have been killed, although it is not clear how many were targeted for attack.¹⁵⁵⁸

MILITARY USE OF SCHOOLS

Numerous incidents were reported of government forces, including the Syrian Armed Forces, the intelligence forces and the Shabbiha militia, using schools either as temporary bases, military staging grounds, sniper posts or detention and interrogation facilities.¹⁵⁵⁹ The Syrian Network for Human Rights

alleged in early 2013 that government forces had turned approximately 1,000 schools into detention and torture centres and used schools to house security and intelligence personnel or as positions from which to shell the surrounding area.¹⁵⁶⁰

The opposition Free Syrian Army also used schools in a number of areas as bases, makeshift hospitals and detention centres, as well as for ammunition storage.¹⁵⁶¹ For example, the UN reported that Free Syrian Army elements in Idlib governorate used two classrooms of the Al Shahid Wahid Al Jusef High School as barracks for a number of days when children were in class.¹⁵⁶² Human Rights Watch – which documented military use by forces on both sides – reported that opposition groups used schools for barracks and command posts and that government forces attacked schools because they had been taken over by the opposition forces.¹⁵⁶³ Similarly, a newspaper article alleged that a school was bombed by rebels in 2012 because it was being used as a base by security forces and pro-government militia.¹⁵⁶⁴

ATTACKS ON HIGHER EDUCATION

State security forces killed students in raids on universities and student protests. Three higher education students were killed, 21 injured and 130 arrested during a raid of student dormitories by security forces at Damascus University in June 2011 after students refused to participate in pro-government rallies.¹⁵⁶⁵ Another student was killed during an attack by security forces on a protest at Damascus University in April 2011.¹⁵⁶⁶ In May 2012, four students were killed, 28 injured and 200 arrested during a raid at Aleppo University in which teargas and bullets were fired at protesters by security forces.¹⁵⁶⁷

Four academics were assassinated in one week in Homs in September 2011, with responsibility for the killings unattributed.¹⁵⁶⁸ By October 2011, the number of scholars assassinated in targeted attacks by security forces was 10, mostly from Homs, according to the opposition.¹⁵⁶⁹

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION IN 2013

As the conflict between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and rebel groups continued into 2013, attacks persisted against Syrian schools and universities, their students and staff. Schools were affected by aerial attacks,¹⁵⁷⁰ car bombs¹⁵⁷¹ and missile strikes,¹⁵⁷² often with high numbers of victims. In September, an incendiary bomb was dropped on the playground of the Iqraa Institute Secondary School, Aleppo province, killing 10 pupils and at least one teacher and causing severe burns to 19 more students.¹⁵⁷³ Later that month, a fuel-air bomb landed on a high school in Raqqa killing 15 civilians, of whom 14 were students and one was the school janitor.¹⁵⁷⁴ It has not been verified whether the schools were the intended targets in either of these two attacks.

In higher education, two of the country's most prestigious universities were hit by multiple explosions. Two explosions killed at least 82 and wounded dozens more, possibly as many as 150,¹⁵⁷⁵ at Aleppo University on the first day of mid-term examinations in January.¹⁵⁷⁶ Students and university staff were believed to be among the dead.¹⁵⁷⁷ The rebels blamed a government air strike; the government said rebels had attacked with rockets.¹⁵⁷⁸ A mortar shell hit the café of Damascus University's engineering campus on 28 March, killing at least 10 students and wounding 20.¹⁵⁷⁹ The government and rebels blamed each other.

ENDNOTES SYRIA

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