



DAVID ENDERS/MCT  
Math teacher Osama Aigi gives a lesson at Taha Hussein High School in Markada, Syria. While many Syrian schools are no longer in session, some continue to operate, in some cases with volunteer teachers.

# In Rebel-Held Syria, Some Schools Try To Carry On

BY DAVID ENDERS  
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MARKADA, Syria — It's unlikely the students and teachers at Taha Hussein High School will soon forget last year's summer break.

"The liberation began two days after final exams," principal Firas Mahjoub recalled, meaning the day the rebels seized the city. The timing was deliberate. "The revolutionaries waited until school was over. Some of them have children here."

"Some of the students fought as well," added Osama Aigi, a math teacher.

Markada, a city of about 70,000 in eastern Syria, for nine months has been solidly under control of the rebels fighting the Syrian government. The current school year began a month and a half late, but it is in session, a remarkable achievement in a country where it is as common to see school buildings used as military bases or shelters for the displaced as it is to see them used as meeting places for students and educators. Others are simply empty, as parents fear sending their children to school or residents and staff have fled.

UNICEF has sounded the alarm on Syria's education system. "One-fifth of the country's schools have suffered direct physical damage or are being used to shelter displaced persons," the United Nations agency reported. "In cities where the conflict has been most intense, some children have already missed out on almost two years of schooling."

Yet on a recent sunny morning in Markada, the scene seemed almost normal as a teacher scolded students who arrived late to class. There were small details that belied the situation — a bell had to be rung manually to mark passing time because there was no electricity, and one administrator complained the students have stopped wearing uniforms — but both students and teachers spoke of the importance of being there.

"Even during the Lebanese civil war, school continued," Mahjoub said, referring to the 15-year conflict that wracked Syria's smaller neighbor.

That doesn't mean violence hasn't touched the school.

"Sometimes people come with guns to see students," Mahjoub said, declining to elaborate further. "We are powerless to stop them."

Other problems plague the students. Hasaka province is beset by shortages of basic services and poverty that predated the rebellion against Syrian President Bashar Assad. They've only grown worse.

"Many days I walk (six miles) to school," said Saad Hamid Saleh, an 11th-grader whose family was forced from their home in a nearby village by shelling. "The bus is too expensive."

There are other pressures, Saleh said. Because two of his brothers work in Lebanon, he's free to attend school.

"If no one in my family is working, then I should go to work," he said.

Many of the students come from other parts of Syria, forced from their homes by the fighting. That's made the school overcrowded, as is an elementary school nearby that also has continued to operate.

"Our school was shelled twice," said Sarah Shibli, another 11th-grader whose family fled the city of Deir el-Zour, south of here, six months ago. "We also had bad experiences with the intelligence services. They came to school

looking for people they suspected of fighting the government."

"We have left our village," said Wael Herma, who said he hoped to pursue an engineering degree after graduation to "help rebuild the country."

But the shelling that forced his family to flee their village and closed the school there had also taken a toll.

"I have no desire to study anymore," he said.

The situation has its oddities. Some of the teachers still travel 60 miles north to the city of Hasaka, the seat of the province where Markada is located, to collect their salaries from the government. Hasaka city is one of the few places left in the province that is under government control. Students still are waiting to find out whether their baccalaureate exams will be held in Hasaka or in Markada.

"About a month ago I went to Hasaka, and they were surprised to find out there was still a school in Markada," said Awwad Ali, an administrator at Taha Hussein. "Some of the teachers are getting paid, others are volunteers. In some cases we are using graduate students."

"As educators, we must remain neutral," Mahjoub said.

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