

Teachers turn to basement schools to help kids in war-torn Syrian city

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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. It is a country in the Middle East. Douma is the largest city in an area called eastern Ghouta. Khamooneh was forced to take his teaching underground in the last month. He wanted to protect students from 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.

Living In A War Zone

Khamooneh wants to help schoolchildren have as normal a life as possible. It's not easy during a war, though.

Many people have taken to living mostly in underground basements. 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 so children don't have to focus on the violence around them.

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

He tries to help the students with their problems, even in hard times. 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.

Schools Destroyed During 8-Year Civil War

Six schools in the city were totally destroyed during Syria's eight-year war. And 15 have been partially destroyed by bombing. This is sad for families, schools are supposed to be places where students feel safe.

The project runs about 48 basement schools in Douma, with an attendance of 3,500 students. It 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," said Adnan Alwan. Alwan is a teacher involved in the project.

The conditions of these basement schools are not good. Alwan compares them to a prison.

Basement Schools Lack Desks, Electricity

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

Teachers try their best to make the schools safe. It's not always possible, though. An attack on a basement school in nearby Irbin killed at least 16 children and four women in late March.

Eleven-year-old Sarah Hajkarem 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 basement is full of Sarah's neighbors, who all have only have one meal a day.

Girl Hoping For A Better Tomorrow

Sarah, who wants to study English literature and become a teacher, 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 has been under attack by the Syrian government since mid-2013. Groups that oppose the government have controlled it during that time.

The situation has quieted down in the past few days. The groups opposing the government have signed agreements with the Syrian government and Russia.

Thousands Of Lives Lost

The deals let rebel fighters and ordinary people leave if they want. As many as 100,000 people have left Ghouta since the agreements were signed. They can only leave with the clothes on their backs and have to leave most of their things behind.

The Syrian civil war has entered its eighth year. It has had a terrible effect on the population. More than 450,000 people have been killed. An estimated 11 million people have left their homes.

Khamooneh 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.

Quiz

- 1 Read the selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-2].

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.

Why does the author say that the attacks may "sound strange"?

- (A) because they are unusually loud
- (B) because they have not stopped
- (C) because they have a mysterious unknown source
- (D) because they are not what someone may expect

- 2 Read the selection from the section "Living In A War Zone."

Many of the students suffer from nightmares and panic attacks, which are symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. PTSD is a condition experienced by people after witnessing or experiencing a life-threatening event.

What is the meaning of "symptoms" as it is used in the sentence above?

- (A) signs
- (B) notes
- (C) dreams
- (D) illnesses

- 3 Read the section "Basement Schools Lack Desks, Electricity."

Which detail from the section shows that some students never leave the basement shelters?

- (A) These spaces lack desks and tables. Instead, children sit on blankets or worn out carpets. Electricity is provided by battery-operated lights.
- (B) Teachers try their best to make the schools safe. It's not always possible, though.
- (C) "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."
- (D) The basement is full of Sarah's neighbors, who all have only have one meal a day.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Thousands Of Lives Lost."

The deals let rebel fighters and ordinary people leave if they want. As many as 100,000 people have left Ghouta since the agreements were signed. They can only leave with the clothes on their backs and have to leave most of their things behind.

What is the MOST accurate explanation of this paragraph?

- (A) Many people are willing to leave their homes and belongings behind to escape from Ghouta.
- (B) Rebel fighters have been trying to help people leave Ghouta since the beginning of the war.
- (C) Ordinary people believe that the agreement will lead to peace in the area around Ghouta.
- (D) Government fighters plan to sign many more agreements to help people in other cities.