

School Barriers for Syrian Armenians

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Differences in language and lesson content make it hard for refugee pupils to keep up.

Syrian Armenian refugees in Yerevan are worried about their children's education, fearing that differences in language and curriculum will restrict their opportunities if and when they return home.

These are fears shared by Angela and Maral Gasparyan, schoolgirls from Syria now living in the Armenian capital. The sisters, one in the eighth grade and the other in the ninth, are struggling to keep up with their studies and already worrying about whether they will get the marks they will need to grades to allow them to go on to university.

One problem is that of language. Western Armenian is spoken in the diaspora, whereas in Armenia itself the eastern dialect is standard. Although similar, the two can be confusing, especially when it comes to scientific terminology.

Angela and Maral find it hard to learn through Eastern Armenian texts, and are too embarrassed to keep interrupting the class to ask what something means.

Their grandmother Zepyur Khshvadyan says they have settled in well at their school in Yerevan, but still need private coaching in the eastern dialect.

"We are certainly grateful to the school for providing an environment in which children can communicate and make good friends, but we just cannot imagine how they will take the university entrance examinations, because of the language barrier," she told IWPR.

This year, 150 children from Syria are starting school in Armenia, part of a total of about 1,200 currently studying in the country.

A wide range of support is offered by both the government and charities, with the children receiving free textbooks, lessons in Russian and Eastern Armenian, and school dinners if necessary.

Lena Halajyan, who advises the diaspora ministry on the Armenian communities in Syria, told IWPR, "As a result of interviews we carried out, it became clear that the children of Syrian Armenians generally have difficulties in terms of learning scientific terminology."

She said that the education department of Yerevan municipality, with support from the private sector, had organised free training to address this.

Earlier this month, the Armenian office of the International Red Cross gave all Syrian Armenian students 34,300 drams (85 US dollars) each towards school supplies. Another charity, Arakelots Hayastan, provided children with school uniforms and shoes.

"Of course, there are parents who refuse [to accept food and clothes], but in fact all of them have the opportunity to take advantage of a variety of charitable programmes," Halajyan said, adding that in the near future, with financial support from the All-Armenian Fund in Brazil and the United Nations refugee agency UNCHR, all the pupils from Syria would receive free Russian lessons.

When the flow of refugees from Syria began, attempts were made to provide specialised education for the children.

In 2012, a school called Cilicia was opened for Armenian Syrian pupils, sharing the premises of an existing school in central Yerevan.

Founded by the ministries for the diaspora, education and science as well as the Yerevan municipality and the Cilicia charity, the school only operated for one year.

"When we opened this temporary school, we were hoping the war would soon be over and the kids would go back to their main school... so Cilicia was a temporary solution for children who had missed lessons in [Syrian] schools," said Narine Hovhannisyan, head of universal education at the ministry of education and science. "But over time, it became clear that most of them were not going back to Syria, and that meant that it was necessary to find permanent, long-term solutions."

Gayane Soghomonyan, head of education in Yerevan municipality, emphasised that all state schools were open to Syrian Armenians.

“The Syrian Armenians were previously taught only at the Cilicia school, but now they have a chance to study in any school that’s near where they live,” she said.

However, parents note that the short-lived school offered courses impossible to find in mainstream institutions. It followed the curriculum used in Syria, and lessons were taught by Armenian teachers from that country and included Arabic. Most importantly, the whole process took place in the Western Armenian dialect.

“We now live and work in Yerevan, but once the war is over, we will go back to Aleppo,” Alina Boghosyan, a mother to two school-age children, told IWPR. “We left our house in Syria, our property. The Cilicia school solved our problems, as it didn’t omit lessons and it kept pace with the Syrian school curriculum. Now we just don’t know what we will do when we go back.”

Hovhannisyian said fears that children would be unable to keep up with the Syrian curriculum if and when they returned home were unfounded.

“With the support of the ministry, Armenian first-graders from Syria will also have the opportunity to learn Arabic,” she told a press conference. “In addition, it is a minority who intend to go back, so we have to take care of the needs of the majority.”

She added that having a dedicated school for Syrian Armenians would ignore the important role that mainstream education played in integrated newcomers, a view shared by Liana Gharibyan, deputy head of the Yerevan school which hosted the Cilicia facility before it closed.

“If the Syrian Armenian kids are going to live in Armenia, it is only right for them to learn with local schoolchildren,” she said.

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