Education Activism in the Syrian Civil War: Resisting by Persisting

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This article analyzes education activists' resilience in emergencies, building on life story interviews with Syrians who engaged in civil society initiatives for schooling in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. It investigates the meaning that education acquires under extreme adversity and how it inspires individuals to act. Finding that these activists think of education as a means to resist authoritarianism and transform society, the article brings the change agendas of local education actors to the fore. It concludes that resilience can be the extension of political purpose. The article conceptualizes education as a vehicle of resistance, foregrounding how temporal projections enable individuals to maintain belief in their capability to enact changes. The activists make connections between their own experiences in school, thoughts about the future, and the reasons they mobilize for education. Working with time is a potent enabler when, objectively, the situation is deteriorating.

Introduction

The resilience of some schools and teachers under war conditions is a puzzle (Davies 2005). What inspires individuals to organize education themselves in emergencies and persist against all odds? This article analyzes education as an instrument of activism during the Syrian Civil War. It examines life stories of actors who supported the 2011 uprising and engaged in civil society initiatives for schooling in its aftermath. The cases are drawn from both the regime-held and formerly opposition-held territories. The activists' volunteer efforts consist in creating substitutes for schools in areas where war has disrupted the education system or internally displaced people have lost years of schooling. I therefore use the terms *school* and *education* interchangeably.

The civil war had a devastating effect on primary education in Syria. One in three schools were damaged or destroyed, and a total of 2.1 million children are currently estimated to be out of school (UNICEF, n.d.). Deprived of

access to state education, Syrians both at home and in neighboring countries have relied on international assistance and community schools (Hos 2016; Adelman 2019; Maadad and Matthews 2020). Civil society actors have mobilized to help their vulnerable compatriots (Pearlman 2019; Sunata and Abdulla 2020). Research has shown that many Syrians who engage in humanitarian work have a past in revolutionary action (Ruiz de Elvira 2019). In this article, I turn the focus on education activism inside Syria and analyze how it combines with agendas of political resistance.

I pursue two interrelated subquestions. The first regards the personal disposition of people who engage in civil society work under an overhanging threat of danger. What characterizes individuals who dedicate themselves to education in situations of extreme uncertainty, when others chose to withdraw? I draw on Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory to discuss this matter. The second question concerns the nature of education activism and the sense-making that it allows for. What meaning does education acquire under revolution and war and how does it inspire individuals to act?

Finding that activists think of schooling as a means to resist authoritarianism and transform society, the article brings the change agendas of local education actors to the fore. The possibility of redressing the underlying causes of crises through education is a long-standing concern of education in emergencies (Pigozzi 1999). However, the field has primarily focused on the intervention of international actors (Lerch 2017), and scholars have warned that the role of local education actors in conflict is not always benign (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Davies 2010; Burde 2014). In recent years, the education in emergencies (EiE) community has started to place more emphasis on resilience in war-affected communities (Abu-Amsha and Armstrong 2018; Greaves et al. 2020). A recent review article found that the growing focus on resilience comes at the expense of a transformative view of education in emergencies (Shah et al. 2020).

According to Shah and colleagues (2020), resilience is commonly conceptualized as the end goal in EiE discourse and as a quality that individuals can "learn" to cope with the crisis. Its rise on the EiE agenda has coincided with a downplaying of the political stakes and reduced attention to the structural causes of conflicts. I take the contrary approach of connecting resilience to political struggles (Shah and Cardozo 2015). The prospect of contributing to systemic change is a driving force for the education volunteers whom I have studied. I use the term "education activism" to capture their transformative ambition.

This article highlights the motivational aspect of time in education activism. Although, in urgent situations, the present is the immediate cause of concern, individuals who act in emergencies are conditioned by past experiences and may be guided by ideas about the future. In the life story interviews presented here, activists make connections between their own experiences in

school and the reasons they mobilize for education. They also underscore the long-term effects of their current investment. I maintain that subjective inter-linking of the past, present, and future is a central sense-making drive in education activism, enabling individuals to maintain a belief in their ability to enact change.

Education activism is saturated with meaning because it connects individuals with communities, ideals with realities, and the past with the present and the future. The school is a microcosm of society both as lived experience and as an opportunity for imagining the sociopolitical community. Education is a repository of change because the pupils of today are the citizens of to-morrow. But the school is also a reflection of the past and the nature of the political system.

In the following, I present a framework for analyzing education activism as resistance, situate the school in the context of authoritarianism in Syria, discuss the research method, and analyze the empirical findings. I have organized the analysis in terms of past, present, and future to emphasize the motivational impact of time.

Education Activism as Resistance

In emergencies where armed conflict disrupts civilian access to education, grassroots-organized schooling can contribute to filling the gap (Vega and Bajaj 2016; Burde et al. 2017). Whether in the form of local or individual initiatives or as a part of wider social movements, community mobilization can help civilians to weather the crisis. Specifically, teachers are a critical resource (Rose and Greeley 2006). However, teachers are often targets in war (O'Malley 2010). This article investigates the reasons why some individuals defy the danger and devote themselves to education regardless. Empirical studies of the teacher's role in conflict-affected communities are scarce (Weber 2007). As van Ommering (2017, 105) notes, there is a "lack of accounts that acknowledge the sociopolitical contexts in which schooling is situated, and relate this to teachers' and students' perspectives of teaching and learning." In Syria, I will show that the activists see the struggle for education as a way to resist authoritarian rule. The nature of educational work, in combination with their personal qualities, sustains their persistence.

School as Space of Resistance

In authoritarian countries, the school is simultaneously an instrument of political control and a potential trigger of resistance. The former has received more scholarly attention than the latter. Historians have discussed the education system's role in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Franco's Spain, and the Soviet Union, to name a few (Laudo and Vilanou 2015; Tarquini 2015). In the Third Reich, the school served to undermine individual autonomy and create an obedient generation prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice (Pine 2010).

Similarly, the Soviet classroom was used to subordinate and manipulate pupils' minds to internalize political deference (Kestere 2017).

School can also be a space of resistance to authoritarian rule, although research on this topic is sparse. Studies of resistance are increasingly concerned with its "more subtle and diffused articulations" (Lilja 2020, 217) but have paid scant attention to the actions of teachers.[1] In educational research, the literature on teachers as social movement actors is scattered (Niesz et al. 2018). An exception that proves the rule is Novelli's (2010) analysis of education activists' resistance to the Colombian state and its paramilitary allies during the Colombian civil war. Novelli shows that educators with a socially transformative agenda were the main targets of repression.

In authoritarian regimes that suppress the room for regular opposition activity, education can become an alternative to politics: a lingering space where it is still possible to act (Mirshak 2020). Schools may be conduits for resistance (Mohamed et al. 2016). Discussing Spain under Franco, Groves (2012, 2014) argues that teachers used the classroom to fight cultural practices they associated with dictatorship and to nurture democratic habits. For example, they abandoned corporal punishment, gave children an active role in the learning process, and encouraged them to express their opinions freely as part of a long-term struggle for liberation.

Working with Time

Education offers opportunities for transforming society by planting the seeds of change in the youth. Critical pedagogy is based on this idea (Apple 2012). Inspired by critical theory, it examines relations of power and domination within the practice of education. The aim is to emancipate pupils from human oppression by awakening their critical consciousness (Freire 2018). Freire laid the foundation of critical pedagogy when he argued that the teacher's job is to stimulate the student's subjectivity (Kincheloe 2008).

Recognizing students as subjects of power means believing in their potential to effectuate change in society down the line. It implies that pedagogical sites, as places where identities are formed, have political relevance. Giroux (2004, 34) sees education as "a form of political intervention in the world that is capable of creating the possibilities for social transformation." The teacher should help students develop a consciousness of freedom and recognize authoritarian tendencies (Giroux 2020). Apple (2011, 27) argues that the school is "a crucial site for creating activist identities."

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[1] In the civil resistance literature, analyses of social movements and contentious politics dominate (Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Schock 2013). Studies of less organized and visible articulations—what Scott named "everyday resistance"—seldom focus on the educational domain (Scott 1985; Johansson and Vinthagen 2016; Lilja et al. 2017).

Self-Efficacy

Not everyone is disposed to become an activist under conditions of war and authoritarianism, however. Scholars of social mobilization have identified efficacy beliefs as a psychological prerequisite that enables resistance by individuals or communities (Klandermans 1997; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2017). As defined by the social cognitive theorist Albert Bandura (1997, 3), self-efficacy denotes "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainment." Bandura argues that people's beliefs about their capacity to perform under different sets of conditions have a powerful impact. People who believe in their ability to create results will attempt to make things happen. Conversely, those who lack faith in their ability to produce the desired effects of their actions have little incentive to act.

Efficacious people are resilient to hardships and quick to take advantage of opportunities when they arise. The activists studied here belong to this category. They mobilize under conditions that would scare other people off. A person or group's perceived ability to impact upon a political process is commonly described as "political efficacy" (Caprara et al. 2009). According to Bandura (1997, 483), political efficacy is a function of personal efficacy, on the one hand, and the amenability of the political system, on the other. Repression and exclusion run counter to political efficacy. Authoritarian regimes stifle opportunities to build individual and collective efficacy by restricting free speech, banning public associations, infiltrating society, and applying divide-and-rule tactics that create suspicion and distance among people. That said, individuals who lack efficacy beliefs will generate little change even in democratic systems. Likewise, those who trust in their ability to produce the desired effects of their actions may "figure out ways to exercise some measure of control over social systems containing limited opportunities and many constraints" (483).

The School under Assad's Authoritarianism

The populist-authoritarian Baath regime that took power in Syria in 1963 saw mass education as an integral part of its "revolution from above" (Hinnebusch 2004). It set out to modernize the country by building infrastructure, factories, bureaucracies, and schools (Heydemann 1999). Politically, the regime used education to discipline and propagandize the population. The Baathists built a repressive state, letting single-party rule penetrate all public institutions. After 1970, Hafiz al-Assad wrested power from the officers corps and the party and established a person-dominated regime (Wedeen 2015).

The school system under Assad was imbued with militarism. From attire to values, courses, buildings, organization, and surveillance, the influence of military socialism was clear. Pupils had to wear uniforms and attend military

education classes as part of the curriculum. They lined up in the mornings to recite the Baath party slogan and salute the flag, surrounded by high walls in physically closed-off courtyards. Military teachers enforced strict discipline and inflicted corporal punishment on unruly children. The security services also had informants in every school, watching not only the pupils but also, and especially, the activities of the teachers.

Education was a vehicle for mass mobilization and spreading the state ideology. Children were enrolled in the Baath vanguard organization in primary school and expected to become regular party members in the tenth grade (Bali 2015, 27). On special occasions, the authorities would request that pupils wear civilian clothes and take part in mass rallies. The purpose was to prop up legitimation claims by creating the appearance of popular support for the regime (Masud 2018).

The Assad school socialized children into a culture of obedience and discouraged independent agency. In the following analysis, I contrast the values inculcated in Syria's authoritarian education system with the beliefs expressed by the activists studied here in their capabilities to bring about change from below.

Method: Life Story Interviews

A life story is "the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived," and thus highlights aspects important to the teller (Atkinson 1998, 8). It provides a vantage point for observing how the person experiences and understands life, identifying "threads and links that connect one part of a person's life to another" (Gubrium and Holstein 2001, 126). Life story interviews are suited for showing the meanings people attach to the activities they engage in (Horst 2019). In parallel, they expose societal and political patterns (Chamberlayne et al. 2000). Biographical methods draw on individual life experience to explain the social world (Bornat 2008). They produce knowledge about the subjective and external context of individual choices.

I chose life story interviews as a way to trace activist motivations to micro-historical (individual) experiences while keeping the macro-historical perspective (the history of the time) in view (Hagemaster 1992). This method is designed to minimize the researcher's intervention in the narrative. Nonetheless, the sheer fact that the interviewer was Western might have influenced the story the activists told. I kept this possibility in mind while interpreting the data.

The life stories were collected from both sides of territorially divided Syria: the formerly rebel-held lands as well as the areas that remained under government control. I interviewed activists from the first group in Turkey, gaining access through two key informants. For the regime-held territories, I traced exiled activists in Europe and organized meetings in Lebanon with those who

continued to be active on the ground. Between December 2017 and June 2018, I collected a total of 10 life stories with an average length of 109 minutes. The interviews, which were carried out in the speakers' mother tongue (Arabic), were recorded, translated, and transcribed. The questions were open-ended and the subsequent analysis inductive.

The interviewees had diverse social backgrounds. Some were born in cities, others in the countryside. Some were privileged and others working class. Some had grown up in a conservative religious environment; others were raised in a secular-leftist spirit. Some came from families with political engagement; others had been strangers to politics before the Arab uprisings. Half the interviewees were men and the other half women. They also belonged to different religious identity groups.

My overarching argument builds on how these activists make connections in their interviews between past, present, and future. Temporal connections are important sense-making devices that help individuals sustain motivation, not least in situations of radical uncertainty. I make the case that experiences in the past and thoughts about the future contribute to sustaining resistance *in the present.* To support this argument, I have structured my analysis chronologically.

The Past

Stories of past injustice abound in the research data, and many of them relate to school. These stories evolve around physical punishment, differential treatment, and political discipline.

Physical Punishment

Physical punishment was referred to by nearly all the interviewees. The frequency with which it was mentioned is an indication of how common it has been for teachers to hit pupils. Observed in a different light, it can also be a sign of how deeply such practices marked the activists. Violence leaves traces on children, whether they experience it directly or as third-party witnesses (Selvik 2018). To give an example, Sara described the horrors of her first job in an orphanage, when she made the unfortunate decision to call the inspector to handle an unruly pupil:

> Nobody taught teachers how to deal with kids with special needs. One of the kids was tiring me out so I called on the inspector. He came and asked me to go down to the administration office on the first floor. The headmaster asked why I was down there in the middle of my class. I said the inspector was in my class. She was very angry with me and yelled that I was a failure. I was stressed and smoked three cigarettes in 15 minutes. Then the inspector called me and when I came back the kids were not moving or speaking a word. It felt as if I was teaching to a wall. I asked, "What's up?" Nobody answered. I called on the boy who had been misbehaving. He came up hiding the back of his head. When I looked at him, he had a 5-centimeter hole in the back of his head that was 1–2 centimeters deep. He said, "Miss, I beg you, don't tell the

inspector that you've seen the wound." I suddenly understood why the headmaster had been so angry. I kissed his hand and said, "I'm so sorry that I put you in this situation." I understood why 350 pupils in the orphanage stood like military personnel as soon as the inspector arrived.[2]

This ghastly experience marked the young teacher for life. She blamed herself for abandoning the child to the inspector and being unaware of how the orphanage worked. Her eyes were opened to an institutionalized cruelty of which she had become a part. Coupled with her own memories of enduring corporal punishment in school, the incident became a personal turning point. Sara made a conscious choice to practice her profession in a different way in order to break the generational cycle of violence: "I decided to be a teacher that does not hit."[3] As regards the connection between education and activism, this example shows a two-layered effect. Experiencing violence in school is the first and perhaps the most direct push for wanting to change the system. But another and no less important driver is the ability to make a difference by acting in the educational domain. Education activism promises to improve the life of many children if the teacher starts by being the change herself.

Differential Treatment

Differential treatment was also observed in class. The Assad school favored the politically loyal and children whose fathers held a position in the regime. Other pupils faced an uphill battle. The young activist Faris explained: "What annoyed me in school was that the children of regime personnel, officers and the like, were given special treatment. The teacher would not hit the son of an officer, for example. The officer's son would get the questions before the exam. He would be lazy and not study, yet turn out with better grades than us. . . . The officer's son would be let into school if he came late. But me, if I came a minute late, they would lock the door in my face. Everywhere there was preferential treatment."[4] Public school reflects a country's political organization and is often the first place where children encounter the state. As Faris experienced it, the public order was fundamentally unjust. Children are sensitive to differential treatment and will intuitively ask why it occurs. In Faris's case, growing up to understand why certain kids received better treatment became a motive for activism. In generic terms, favoring the "officer's son" is part of an intrinsic problem in authoritarian regimes: namely, the insider-outsider division they create. By favoring the individuals or groups on which their survival depends, they foster a sense of injustice in others. School is a publicly shared arena where everyday discrimination against

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[2] Author's interview with Sara, June 5, 2020.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Author's interview with Faris, June 4, 2018.

outsiders occurs. It is therefore also a breeding ground for grievances that may lead to resistance.

Political Discipline

The activists also reacted to the political indoctrination and disciplining that took place in school. From daily rituals such as flag salutes to "patriotic training" courses, the messaging was also woven into the curriculum. History was a particularly biased subject, designed to place the regime in a favorable light (Bolliger 2011). The ruling family even found its way into the math instruction, as the names of the current president and his brother (Bashar and Maher) were used to illustrate the assignments.[5] Ramiz recalled memorizing songs that praised the regime and the president. The propaganda claimed that Hafiz al-Assad had built modern Syria: "I thought as a little boy that Syria before Hafiz was a desert without civilization."[6]

Many of the interviewees explained that the message heard in class conflicted with their upbringing at home. Some grew up in families critical of the country's social and political conditions and had role models for resistance from an early age. Others had parents who avoided political conversations with their children, either to preserve them from dangerous influences or out of fear that the word would get out in school. They nonetheless described a clash between their school experiences and the values taught within the family that caused them, with time, to adopt a critical posture.

In social cognitive theory, the home is the principal nurturing ground for self-efficacy beliefs. These beliefs thrive on verbal persuasion in the form of feedback that encourages effort, vicarious reinforcement through observing others perform, psychological and emotional predisposition, and previous mastering experiences. According to Bandura (1997, 79–113), previous mastering experiences have the most powerful influence in fostering efficacy beliefs, as they provide direct feedback regarding one's capabilities. Growing up with a sense that one "can do" provides a feeling of control over one's environment. The ways the activists describe their upbringing give reason to believe they acquired such beliefs at home. In the Assad schools, they were taught a different lesson.

The school played a key role in enforcing control by striking down signs of political activism and independent thinking. In every school, there were intelligence service informants, and "the walls had ears," both in and outside the classroom. The security officers also took proactive steps to ensure that students left school with no political ambitions. The following excerpt from a life story interview with Karim speaks volumes:

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[5] Author's interview with 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hajj, minister of education in the provisional government, May 20, 2018.

[6] Author's interview with Ramiz, June 5, 2018.

> When I was in the tenth grade we had a teacher in patriotic training. . . . He came to our class and asked, "Who gets a 20 [out of 20] in patriotic training?" I raised my hand and said I got a 20. It was not specific to patriotic training; I got 20s in most subjects. He asked, "Are you a member of the party?" I said no. He asked why and I responded that I spent all my time studying. He called on a party member in class and told him to enroll me in the party. But I felt hatred toward the Baath party inside. The boy who was a party member was nice, he was my friend, and asked, "Do you want to become a member?" I said no. Two weeks later the teacher came back. He asked, "Have you become a member?" I said no. He said, "Why?" I said, "I don't have time." He said ok. When the results came out he had given me a 7, just below the passing line of 8. During the year, he would treat me very badly. He would hit me for nothing.[7]

The patriotic training teacher's message was clear for everyone to observe: either you submit to the regime's domination or we bring you down. By demonstrating force in this manner, the security official worked to undermine the pupil's belief in his ability to get by unless he aligned with the party and the leader. The episode was a public humiliation of sorts, designed to break the boy's morale. Summarized in terms that show the political ramifications of self-efficacy beliefs, the gist of the message was, "You can't!"

Many years later, this episode resurfaced as Karim related the story of his life. He had grown to become a dogged and experienced civil society organizer with education as his mission. The boy's trajectory illustrates a paradox of the Syrian regime's indoctrination approach. The school as authoritarian tool manifestly left an impact. However, encounters with unjust authority are also a source of mobilization for some (Gamson et al. 1982). Authoritarian control strategies have the unintended effect of generating resistance. When popular protests broke out in Syria as part of the Arab uprisings, the activists were predisposed to join.

The Present

I now turn to discussing the present, defined as the phase from when the interviewees decided to engage in education activism to the time of the interviews in 2017–18. The starting point was the 2011 uprising, in which all the activists took part. Education posed a practical problem from the very beginning in the rebel-held territories. In government-held Syria, the need for civil society education became manifest with time.

Being Able

Most of the activists from rebel-held Syria were teachers by training and worked in the Assad school system when the uprising started. They left the safety of their public-sector positions for an uncertain future. Faris traveled across the country to join the revolutionary movement in Aleppo. He began

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[7] Author's interview with Karim, June 4, 2018.

a course of military training but soon discovered that his teaching competency was in high demand: "Everyone wanted me to teach their children."[8] A spirit of volunteerism was in the air, awakened by the revolution. Personal readiness was coupled with the practical necessity of meeting children's educational needs. Teachers with prior experience and training could readily make a difference. Faris thus decided to leave the military camp and devote himself to education.

Adam alluded to additional motivating forces. He remained in a stable regime-held area for two months, observing the revolution while retaining the security of his public-service salary. His mother implored him to stay on, but he was beset by feelings of responsibility and guilt . Early one morning, he opened the door and left:

> I had a strong feeling that these children were my destiny, that I would be held accountable for them on Judgment Day. I could not leave them. They were children. There were armed groups and the regime and they could fight each other to hell. My responsibility was to not leave these children alone. I had to help them … you say shame on a young man when he can help with civil work. There is a war and you are able. If you leave it means you are fleeing. You are fleeing from a responsibility. You saw the civilians and the old people; how come you left them?[9]

This passage reveals several drivers of education activism that appear to reinforce each other. Compassion is one driver, because the activist perceives that the children are in need. Witnessing human suffering firsthand has an effect on most people. Adam underscores the effect of seeing thousands of abandoned children, many of them poor, elsewhere in the interview. A sense of moral responsibility is a second: the activist assumes that he will be judged based on his actions toward the children. A strong feeling of responsibility may enable a person to control his fear (Bauhn 2003). Relatedly, self-efficacy is a third motivator, in the sense that Adam considers himself to be capable. He believes in his ability to achieve his objectives and this confidence reinforces his feeling that he has a responsibility to act.

Realizing Self-Rule

Collective efficacy was also on the rise because of the revolution. The massive protests and success in expelling the regime from parts of Syria bolstered citizens' confidence in their ability to shape the political process. Karim took part in efforts to coordinate between the numerous educational initiatives that emerged on the ground. He explained why the educational administration was perceived to be important:

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[8] Author's interview with Faris.
[9] Author's interview with Adam, June 4, 2018.

> We had a big fear there would be chaos in the areas where the regime withdrew its resources. We wanted to keep the civil affairs well-structured. . . . Everyone was working with a spirit of volunteerism. They were getting rid of the Assad regime. I always say that those days were the happiest of my life. . . . The feeling that you're serving other people and progress in the heart of your educational mission, opening schools and bringing back children who had dropped out. It was a marvelous feeling. I love the sight of nature. But even more beautiful is the view of a school being opened and the pupils coming back with their backpacks and books.[10]

Besides the personal affection demonstrated in this passage, it is interesting how Karim makes a connection between keeping civil affairs well organized and getting rid of the Assad regime. For the revolution to become a success, it was imperative for the civilian infrastructure to deliver. Since the revolutionaries had wrested territory from the regime, they needed to prove that they could provide an alternative. Organizing education was a way to realize the aims of the revolution by sending the signal, "We can!" The regime was adamant in seeking to prevent rebel groups from building embryonic state structures. It targeted public infrastructure in opposition-held areas with aerial campaigns. Bakeries, hospitals, and schools were deliberately bombed to terrify civilians and undermine daily life in the areas beyond the regime's control. Martínez and Eng argue that the underlying rationale was to stifle expressions of stateness: "By systematically annihilating the administrative institutions and public services that shape rebel-civilian relations, the Assad regime delegitimizes its competitors and prevents the emergence of coherent alternatives" (Martínez and Eng 2018, 237).

Despite the horror, the activists kept education going. They changed teaching venues and did their best to fix the things that broke. They reached out for international help and distributed food and clothes from supporters. They sought to convince increasingly worried parents that they should continue to send their children to school. Inside the classroom, the activists tried to comfort pupils and distract their attention from the recurring sound of bombs. "When there is a bombing, I start to tidy the place and play games with them," Adam explained. "It makes them laugh."[11] He would clean up, put out decorations, and bring the children toys and snacks to elicit positive energy. Most of all, he avoided showing signs of fear. For Adam, keeping instruction going was about not bowing to terror. It was also a fight against the odds: "We kept on giving lessons until there were no pupils left. They had all left. Horrific bombing. We cried. There was nobody left. We stayed like that for two weeks without any pupils. When 5–6 or 10 pupils came, they were still too few to organize proper teaching. But we worked on their mental state, played with them so they would not be afraid, fed them, took care of them, helped them a

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[10] Author's interview with Karim.
[11] Author's interview with Adam.

bit, and sent them back home. After two weeks, the bombing abated and the pupils started to return."[12] Resistance in this account is a matter of persistence: a defiant act of remaining in the classroom even though all the pupils have left. This sense of meaning allows the activist to go on under mindboggling circumstances. He refuses to yield to the bombs, which signal that there will be no school without Assad's supervision. Adam insists that an alternative to the regime is possible. He continues to convey the message that society, or the community of those who reject Assad's domination, can stand on its own.

An Alternative to Politics

In the government-held areas, the situation for education activism was different. The public schools remained open and no alternative structure that challenged the regime's authority could emerge. All the same, internal displacement placed a strain on the available education resources, and the regime's capacity to provide public services was reduced. Moreover, as security forces focused their attention on re-recapturing the rebel-held territories, the relative restrictions on the in-house civil society eased.

The interviewees from the government-held areas had roots in a banned opposition party. They organized meetings and rallies and issued statements during the 2011–12 protests. However, the regime clamped down on political activism and, by 2013, the space for this political mobilization was all but gone. Hamid recalled that "we could not do politics beyond publishing certain statements on electronic websites. Meanwhile, the humanitarian needs were growing bigger."[13] Based on these observations, the activists decided to shift their efforts from politics to humanitarian work. They started local initiatives to give food and other relief to internally displaced people [IDPs] that had migrated to the cities. After a while, they saw that the IDPs needed educational assistance as well.

The activists gathered groups of children in their homes and brought along teaching volunteers. Many IDPs had dropped out of school. Others had fallen behind. The activists helped children fill knowledge gaps to support their reintegration into school. Gradually, the initiatives became more school-like, with dedicated housing and permanent teachers. Because the activists had no official license, they were walking a thin line with the authorities. However, they enjoyed support from local authority figures and were not perceived as posing a security threat. Nonetheless, when it came to their personal motivation, the activists saw their humanitarian work as part of a wider transformation project. "The opposition's program is a total program, a new structure for the country, from the top of the pyramid to the bottom," said Jena.[14]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Author's interview with Hamid, November 16, 2017.

[14] Author's interview with Jena, February 1, 2018.

The Future

The prospect of change is where the forward-looking part of education activism enters the picture. As the activists perceive it, the future of the community is at stake. Expectations of what will happen "down the road" work as both negative and positive motivation for the interviewees. On the one hand, their fear about the cumulative impacts of a devastating war is unmistakable. With millions of children losing out on essential education, the prospects for Syria are arguably dark. "The regime is working to make us ignorant," exclaimed Adam. For the sake of resistance, he said, "the school must not close."[15] On the other hand, bringing time to the equation means that what is failing today may be improved in the future. It opens a space where the activists can act. The interviewees foresee long-term positive effects of their education activism. Consider the following example of how this projection in time can work:

> What drives me to remain a teacher is this: I will keep on striving for what is left of my country and the revolution with my friends and pupils, because there are still children that need help. If I contribute to a child's education, it means that he will be able to read and write and nobody will be able to fool him. He will be a supporter in the future . . . the regime thugs won't be able to recruit him. I build his resilience and strength. This is what I work for. Maybe I will die without being able to achieve this goal, but I will be at peace with my conscience.[16]

Resistance in this case is a matter of preventing ignorance: containing the education crisis that threatens the Syrian people. It is a question of empowering the next generation so that the "thugs" will not be able to take advantage of them. The passage shows the confidence and feeling of control that come with self-efficacy beliefs, since Ramiz is evidently filled with the sense that "I can." He wants to pass on this robustness to his pupils by teaching them to read and write. The underlying political idea is that if he succeeds in his educational mission, the children will also be able to resist. He is, in other words, passing the torch of resistance, an idea he elaborates on elsewhere in the interview:

> In our tradition, we say that teaching is the work of the prophets. This fills teachers with pride in their work and motivates them to be patient and persist. There is no alternative to dreaming and working for the realization of dreams. At least, if our generation is unable to reach the goals, then the following generation will. I am born in 1983 after Hafiz al-Assad had gained control over Syria and struck down on the revolution in the early 1980s. The children of the people he killed are the ones who rose in the revolution. Today Bashar is killing a lot of fathers. If he remains in power their sons will revolt against him one day.[17]

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[15] Author's interview with Adam.
[16] Author's interview with Ramiz.
[17] Ibid.

One should keep in mind the context in which these words were collected. In 2018, government forces had reconquered much of the territory in the north and driven the activists out of Syria into Turkey. Internationally, it was said that Assad, supported by Russia and Iran, was on the verge of winning and the opposition had already lost. Ramiz had switched to teaching Syrians in exile while extending support to civil society initiatives in the self-rule areas that remained. Regarding personal motivation, the question is how he dealt with this setback and apparent defeat. There is no hint of resignation in his interview or any preparedness to wave the white flag. Instead Ramiz turns the idea of defeat on its head and reminds the wrongdoer that "what goes around comes around." Looking ahead enables him to continue resisting in the form of educating children. He is empowering tomorrow's protestors, whom he believes will prevail in the end.

Research shows that for civil resistance to take place, it is not enough that an individual or group identify an injustice. There is also a need for that individual or group to believe in their responsibility and ability to address it (Stapnes et al. 2020). I have argued that the interviewees in this study are carriers of such efficacy beliefs and that the temporal projection specific to education activism contributes to reinforcing those beliefs. Working with time is a potent enabler when conditions in the present are bleak. Passing on knowledge to children helps sustain morale when, objectively, the situation is deteriorating. Thus Hamid described the education initiatives in the government-controlled areas as "building blocks for the future." He admitted that the contribution fell very short of the need, but was nonetheless confident of its strategic importance: "Education. Enlightenment. We need it for a bright future. And despite my belief that what we contribute is less than a drop in the ocean. Its importance lies in preserving these small building blocks for the future so that when the circumstances allow the return of a normal life for political and civil society engagement, they will be there and can spread with strength when the environment is right."[18] The way that Hamid finds meaning and motivation is by focusing on a space in which it is possible to act. He evades a feeling of powerlessness by concentrating on the "building blocks" over which he has real influence. Inside the schools, the activists work to build the Syria they would like. They are committed to educating *citizens* with autonomy, agency, and rights. The interviewees act locally to transform school culture away from the oppressive environment they experienced as children. They send a message that religious and ethnic co-existence is possible by having teachers of different ethnic and religious backgrounds work together. Catering to the needs of predominantly Sunni Muslim IDPs in neighborhoods with religious minority-dominated populations, they help defuse sectarian

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[18] Author's interview with Hamid.

tensions that have flared because of the war. The activist Samra explained that she was countering othering by focusing on fundamental human needs.[19]

Conclusion

As I noted initially, the resilience of education actors in emergencies is often discussed in isolation from politics and the underlying causes of conflict. In this article, I have analyzed education activism as resistance, building on life story interviews with civil society actors in wartime. I have approached education in Syria as a field of political struggle, defined by a legacy of authoritarian rule. The Assad regime used the school system as an instrument of political control, thwarting expressions of defiance from below and building a cult of personality around the regime leader. Memories of injustice in school have ignited activists' determination to resist, and, as Scott (1985) notes, resistance takes forms that reflect the nature of the exercise of power.

This article has analyzed the sense the activists read into education, and how it helps sustain their motivation in adverse times. Summing up, the interviewees find multilayered meaning in education. Fundamentally, education activism is about maintaining the right of children to go to school and learn in protracted conflict. Other, notably political motives attach to this task. Setting up schools is perceived as a way of fighting authoritarian rule in situations where space for regular opposition is shrinking. Some understand education activism as a struggle for critical consciousness that will, with time, undermine authoritarian rule.

Demonstrating society's ability to self-organize is a key element of the activists' resistance. By providing education even in critical conditions they send a message about the Syrian population's ability to stand on its own feet. I have emphasized the contrast between the activists' efficacy beliefs and the lessons taught in the state classroom. The purpose of the school in the Assad regime is to show pupils that they are nothing unless they subject themselves to the president and the party. The Assad school disciplines unruly subjects and discourages political agency for anyone but the man on the top. Against this backdrop, self-efficacy is arguably more than a psychological enabler of protests. In the long-term struggle against authoritarianism, belief in the citizen's capacity to act independently of the state is essentially what the battle is about.

Ultimately, what is being fought over is the degree to which ordinary people can challenge the worldviews and orders that come from above. The repression of the regime carries the message, "You can't." The resistance is an expression of the idea that "We can." In the activists' perception, the battle is fought on the field of education, because education has potential to enslave or empower the child. Since they themselves received an education, and feel

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[19] Author's interview with Samra, December 3, 2017.

that they are able, they think they have a special responsibility to help vulnerable groups.

Transposed to the state level, the struggle manifests in competing claims to sovereignty between Assad and rebel groups. Education takes on meaning as a symbol of stateness in the context of contested sovereignty and war. Rebels use education to build support in the civilian population and to claim international recognition for their rule (Arjona et al. 2015). Organizing schooling outside the central government's reach is a way of communicating to the world that an alternative to Assad exists.

Finally, education carries heavy meaning in times of war because it connects with generations to come. The ability to work with time is a key motivational factor. The interviewees compensate for setbacks and constraints in the present by underscoring the long-term effects of their endeavors. Since the pupils represent the Syrians of tomorrow, that which is unachievable today may still be obtained in the future. I have argued that the pathway opened by education activism for transcending extreme hardship makes it a flexible and robust form of resistance. When everything seems to fall apart, resisting becomes a matter of persisting.

The implication for education in emergencies is that political motives can strengthen the resilience of teachers and schools in countries at war. To understand why certain actors persist, one should look beyond their personal disposition to the goals they strive to achieve. I have made a case for paying attention to the change agendas of local education actors. The capacity of individuals to withstand hardship is increased when they also have a sense of purpose.

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