Education Interrupted: English Education Policy from the Rubble in Syria

Language Education Policy in Syria

Rabia Hos and Halil Ibrahim Cinarbas

Abstract In this chapter, we provide an overview of Syria's overall social, political and ethnic background. Syria, located in a geographically critical location, is home to people different ethnic background such as Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkmen. Having gone through political instability, Syria was under the influences of colonial forces. With the rise of Arab Spring in 2010, civil unrest began in Syria in 2011 and Syria has been in a civil war since then. We, then describe specific approaches to education and policies attached to social and political developments in Syria. Specifically, the chapter first introduces Syria's political history and current situation and its effect on education. Then, it examines English language education policies and its social, economic, and political impact on society. Additionally, English language policy is discussed within the realm of historical, political, and social context.

Keywords Education in Syria • English language policy • Education policy

1   Introduction

This chapter concentrates on a brief background on the Syrian people and its language, then briefly reviews the history of education policy in Syria and then examines language policy in particular and compares it with the neighboring country Turkey.

R. Hos, Ph.D. (✉) • H.I. Cinarbas, M.A.
Independent Researcher, Gaziantep, Turkey
e-mail: rabiahos@gmail.com; hibrahimcinarbas@gmail.com

2   Syria and Syrian People

Syria (Arabic: سورية Sūriya or Sūryaic (السورية العربية الجمهورية), is one of the Arab countries which is located in Southwest Asia, bordering Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Israel to the southwest, Jordan to the south, Iraq to the east, and Turkey to the north. Syria shares borders with countries like Israel and Turkey, which have international, economical and political powers.

According to 2008 population statistics, the population of the Syria is under 20 million (CIA 2013). The population consists of Muslims from various schools and branches and Christian minority. In addition to this, Syria hosted 1,852,300 refugees and asylum seekers for many years (World Refugee Survey n.d.).

Diversity in population shows us that Syria, unsurprisingly, has various ethnicities in the country such as Kurds and Turkmens. However, those ethnic groups are minorities in Syria because "the largest of these groups, the Kurds, constitute about 9 % of the population (1,800,000 people)" (Bacsich n.d.). Most of the Kurd population lives in the northeastern corner of Syria living together, preserving and protecting the ties among them. This allows the Kurds to be able to preserve their language and still speak the Kurdish language.

Syrian Turkmens, the other ethnic group, live in Aleppo, Damascus and Latakia. In addition, in the north and northeast areas (al-Qamishli, al-Hasakah), Assyrian/Syriacs Christians are a significant minority that reside there and their approximate population is around 700,000 in Syria. What is more, it was estimated in 2007 that approximately 1,300,000 Iraqi refugees lived in Syria. Roughly 50 % of these refugees were Sunni Arab Muslims, 24 % Shi'a Arab Muslims, and 20 % Christians. As a result of the long-lasting war in Iraq, Syria opened its doors to the Iraqis and welcomed them.

In addition to the ethnicities and languages in Syria, approximately 88 % of Syria's population is Muslim and 12 % is Christian, though the percentage of Christians has reached 20 % due to the high stream of refugees from Iraq. "Among Muslims, 70 % are from the Sunni branch and are ethnic Arabs, Turks, Kurds, while the rest are divided among other Muslim sects, mainly Alawis (accounting for 20 % of the total population) and Druze Isma'ili (6 %)." (Bacsich n.d.). According to Article 4 of the 1973 Constitution, Syria's official language is Arabic. As Quran and other Islamic books are mostly in Arabic, Arabic language has a higher status among other languages spoken in Syria. Being proficient in writing, speaking and understating Arabic language has vital importance in Syria's education system and society.

3   Political History of Syria

After World War I, France mandated the northern portion of the former Ottoman Empire province of Syria. Until Syria gained its independence in 1946, the French administered the area. However, the new country lacked political stability, and a

series of military coups took place during its first decades. Syria united with Egypt in February 1958 in order to form the United Arab Republic. "In September 1961, the two entities separated, and the Syrian Arab Republic was reestablished."

In November 1970, Hafiz al-Asad, who was a member of the socialist Ba'th Party, seized power in a bloodless coup and brought political stability to the country. "Following the death of President al-ASAD, his son, Bashar al-ASAD, was approved as president by popular referendum in July 2000". (CIA 2013) In the July-August 2006 conflict between Israel and Hizballah, Syria kept its neutrality, but it placed its military forces on alert.

In May 2007, Bashar al-ASAD was elected as president for the second time by popular referendum. In March 2011 in Dar'a, antigovernment protests broke out with protesters calling for some demands. Those demands were "the repeal of the restrictive Emergency Law allowing arrests without charge, the legalization of political parties, and the removal of corrupt local officials" (CIA 2013). Since then demonstrations and unrest have spread to nearly every city in Syria, and the protests turned out to be a civil war in Syria, but the size and intensity of the protests have fluctuated over time.

Even though the Syrian government tried to meet some of those demands such as approving new laws permitting new political parties and liberalizing local and national elections, the use of military force and on going security operations have caused to extended and intense violent clashes between government forces and rebels.

"International pressure on the ASAD regime has intensified since late 2011, as the Arab League, EU, Turkey, and the United States have expanded economic sanctions against the regime." (CIA 2013) The attempts to broker a cease-fire between the two sides decreased tension in Syria for a while, but the attempts were not influential enough to resolve the conflict.

In December 2012, more than 130 countries recognized the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Unrest persists in 2013, and the death toll among Syrian Government forces, opposition forces, and civilians has topped 100,000 (Euronews 2013).

4 Current Situation in Syria and Its Impact on Education

As seen above, Syria has been at the center of foreign concerns after its independence and France, United Nations, United States and Iran have been the main countries involved in Syria's internal and external affairs (Bashshur 1966). Syria's affairs are both complicated and problematic enough to be comprehended.

We should go back to 2011 to understand current situation of Syria. Syria began to fall apart "when several demonstrators were killed by security forces while protesting against the arrest of some teenagers who had painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall" (Euronews 2013). Escalating protests turned out to be a civil war when the Syrian government used military forces to destroy any opposition.

Although the government tried to crush the opposition, the protests became a nationwide civil war. At first, it was thought that the civil war was Syria's internal affair, yet massive and uncontrolled use of military forces raised worldwide concerns.

At first glance, "the conflict in Syria appears on the surface to be a battle between those loyal to President Bashar Al-Assad and those who oppose him. However, reducing the situation to a fight between the 'good' masses struggling for freedom against an 'evil' government is both simplistic and inaccurate" (Euronews 2013), because of the multidimensional nature of the region, Syria's ethnic structure, and Arab Spring resulted in the intensification of the civil war. In addition, foreign powers, chemical weapons and approximately two million refugees rendered the civil war without resolution.

Unfortunately, neither Assad-forces nor rebels accepted to negotiate and resolve the conflict because both sides cannot guarantee to keep what they promised. Including external pressures upon Syria and rebels, the conflict and civil war do not seem that it will be sorted out anytime soon. Sadly, the whole world is helpless and witnesses a country and its nation diminishing and disappearing.

In such a chaotic environment, nothing can be spoken, except for politics and war because the most important and functional governmental institutions are military and parliament. Other units of government, including ministry of Education, have become dysfunctional. As there is no or very little control over educational units in Syria, the educational institutions that manage to stand are used to convene supporter for either loyals or rebels. According to one of the school administrators we interviewed, many of the schools "have been burned down and people have burned the desks and chairs in the schools to warm up from the cold" (Interview transcript, 23/10/2013).

There have been educational improvements since Syria's independence, which will be explained in following sections, yet current situation in Syria leads a nation to rebuild its education from zero because the mentality and perception of education became manipulative, and there are almost no buildings for people to live in, let alone to turn it into a school. In terms of education, Syria should focus on constructing and rebuilding its education more than ever in its history if the conflict in Syria is resolved soon, which seems unlikely anytime soon.

5 Education Policy in Syria

Syria is located at a critical area to the Middle East and Africa. It is a neighboring country to Turkey, Iraq, and Israel, and Lebanon. Historically, Syria has been under the influence of the Ottoman Empire, then France, then Britain and the United States. After its independence, the Syrian education system was adopted from the French, which made it a highly demanding system. The system required applying French language and its mentality to political and educational issues. For this reason, French language became more powerful than other languages in Syria at that

time. However, due to Syria's political ties with other countries, learning and knowing English played an important role in Syria. So as to teach English effectively, Syria had adopted policies for the teaching of English since English was seen as a more prestigious foreign language in Syria. Syria's educational policies were modified and changed depending upon the external influences. In order to understand the changeable nature of the Syrian educational system, in this section we will first present a historical and current overview of education policies in general and then specific language teaching policies in Syria.

Syrian education history should be examined according to historical highlights so as to be more clear and relevant. The history of Syria can be divided into three main periods: Ottoman times, the French Mandate and Independence (Bashshur 1966).

In Ottoman times, there was neither a direct emphasis upon education nor any demand or policy because "the Turks wanted primarily four things from their subjects: obedience, order, taxes and soldiers for their armies" (Bashshur 1966). It was reported that "not a single bookseller could be found in Damascus or Aleppo" during that time (Bashshur 1966). From this perspective, education was not the main concern of a ruling country because regional institutions, which were very rare, taught principally literature and religion, and those institutions were responsible for the education. Educated people in the area at that time formed a very small minority. Only a few people were able to obtain higher education. However, through the end of the Ottoman time, Syria witnessed "the form of institutionalized authority: that of the landlords, and that of the church and the religious communities" (Bashshur 1966). The demandingness of authority created an act to educate people according to their ideologies. The American University was opened with their teachings in Protestant ethics. In competition, the French University was opened and tried to flourish Catholicism in Syria. In 1912, as a reaction and precaution of what could happen in future, a Turkish law college was also opened in Damascus.

In French Mandate times, "a national system of education was created modeled strictly after the French. French state examinations were introduced and French schools multiplied in number" (Bashshur 1966), which was not very surprising. The government institutions became reserved for the French education system's graduates, so educational policies were forced to be modified accordingly. Most importantly, education became a political tool for foreign countries. Either organizing social life or manipulating politics thorough universities were primary concerns of education. As Syria neared its independence, the influence of the American and French universities continued and they were the institutions that established the foundation of Syrian Independence act. "The reforms introduced in the country made the people more aware of this simple fact" (Bashshur 1966) and the French university in Syria created an environment, in which a new and strong spirit of resistance to foreign rule was formed and this approach resulted in as Syria's independence. With the independence of Syria, "foreign schools in general and French ones in particular were suppressed" because strengthening the glory of independence required educational reforms so "the education budget was tripled" to accomplish such an objective. Along with this development, the pre-independence Syrian

University increased its impact on education and "in a period of thirteen years after independence the Syrian University graduated three times as many people as it graduated from its foundation up to independence" (Bashshur 1966). However, Syrian education system had a lot to do because "by the early fifties, when the national system of education started to feed the university with its students, the quality of the students received lowered drastically" (Bashshur 1966). This means that the Syrian University met the needs of elites, and secondary schools were still underdeveloped because of the army officers who had taught students. The dilemma in education in that period resulted in a way that "Syria found itself caught between secondary and university students on the one hand, and army officers on the other, all the product of the same educational system" (Bashshur 1966), yet both sides are dissatisfied with the slow pace of national growth and themselves incompetent at taking charge. Unfortunately, the case was an extreme one and two sides started to suspend the development of education in Syria.

Article 37 of the Syrian 1973 Constitution defines objectives of education as "to bring up a national Arab generation, which is socialist and scientific in its manner of thinking, attached to its history and land, proud of its patrimony, and satiates with the struggling spirit"(Syria National Republic Report, 2000). During the 1970s and 1980s there was an increase in the government's funding for education: from 6.80 % in 1975 to 14.0 % in 1987, but it dropped to 12 % between 1998 and 1999. This drop in the funding reflects both Syria's economic situation as well as the government's difficulty in providing basic education for the growing population of school age children in Syria. Various developments in the educational policy was made (1973, 1976–1980), but it was not until the 1981 Law 35 education has become compulsory "for all Syrian children aged between 6–12". Ten years after this law, in 1990s, the enrollment in primary education was claimed to have been 100 % for boys and 95 % for girls. In 2002, the primary education was restructured to cover ages 6–15 up until the 9th grade. From Syria's independence on, education in Syria developed consistently and gradually. It is claimed "the government of Syria is among the best in the Arab world providing basic education to its citizens" (Huitfeldth and Kabbani 2005). After the grade nine, students need to take a national written examination in order to attend a general secondary school or vocational education for another 3 years. Then, post-secondary education includes university studies (4–6 years).

In addition to the mismatch between the primary and secondary schooling and the university education, Syrian education system "is also suspected of contributing to the current situation by failing to equip students with the skills demanded in the market" (Huitfeldth and Kabbani 2005). Moreover, there was an effort as Syria's education policies were revised to deal with gender inequality and market needs. Female members of Syrian society demanded a good quality of education so that they can cope with the market competition. Although, Syrian education system is still struggling to diminish the inequality between genders, each of which has different attendance percentage in Syrian education system; the gap seems to be closing (Huitfeldth and Kabbani 2005). The school attendance rates among boys and girls up to 9th grade is pretty steady, however in rural areas the drop-out rates are high as boys have to work to contribute to the family and girls are married at a young age.

Education in Syria served varying purposes throughout its history. At first, Syrian education was a tool for foreign countries to manipulate internal affairs and education of Syria. It served and created an environment for religious institutions to influence Syrians' faiths. But later, it helped to increase awareness of Syrian people about independence, and it helped democracy to be established nation-wide. Even though it has many challenges, Syrian education system provided many opportunities to its citizens to receive education, which is a right. Sadly, current situation in Syria swept Syrian education system and education in Syria aside.

6 English and Foreign Language Policy

A language policy is defined as "a set of nationally agreed principles, which enables decision makers to make choices about language issues in a rational, comprehensive and balanced way" (Corson 1990, p. 151). Before Syria's independence in 1946, as mentioned in the previous section, the schools were primarily a tool for American and French forces to exert influence over social and religious life. In addition, only American and French schools emphasized the importance of foreign language education, yet it was only accessible for the elite. In this sense, knowing French or English was a way of becoming eminent. Speaking one of those languages helped people to gain prestige.

In 1967 after the Six Day War, many Christian schools and Muslim schools were converted to national schools (CIA 2013). Many of those schools were based on a Western model and provided foreign language education. However, with the nationalization of the schools both the Christian missionaries and the elite started to lose power. Converting private schools into state schools in the 1970s decreased foreign language impact among school children for a while. Although most of the private schools were turned into state schools, some of the upper class elite Christians in large cities still managed to preserve their private institutions and doing so they preserved their language and established an environment in which they can transfer their language to younger generation.

After the 2002 education reform, English language started to be taught from 1st grade. English is taught as a major subject and is provided seven hours a week by non-native language teachers. French on the other hand is taught from 7th grade until 12th grade as a second foreign language. The 2002 education reform indicates that Syria's foreign language education policy is modified to emphasize English language and English language is situated at the center of the language policy. This may be due to English language's status as a lingua franca throughout the world and Syria may be trying to stay within the outer circle countries. Although English is the main language taught at schools in Syria, French is still taught and its influence on Syrian education has not totally faded.

The language education curricula are not flexible to be modified by institutions or individuals because the Ministry of Education designed the language education curricula. The Syrian curriculum is strictly homogeneous and controlled by the gov-

ernment, therefore there is a lot of reliance on the textbooks by the teachers. In Syria, textbooks are considered as primary instruments for carrying out the English lessons (Raddatz and Hasan 2008). The expectations from all parties including students and teachers are for the teacher to be an authoritarian figure in the classroom and for students to be passive listeners. The students take in the information presented by the teacher and they are evaluated based on the information presented by the teacher directly from the textbooks provided by the government.

Recently having looked at an English course book used in Syrian schools titled *English for Starters* for the elementary students, there is a great emphasis on English alphabet and teaching listening and pronunciation to students. This is in part due to the fact that the alphabet systems between English and Arabic is different, therefore there is a need for the students to learn English alphabet to be able to differentiate the letters and comprehend reading. Additionally, the emphasis on listening and pronunciation may be due to part that in Quranic Arabic teaching, pronunciation plays an important role so the focus on teaching of listening and pronunciation in English may have stemmed from the Arabic language teaching traditions. Additionally, as we looked at the English books, the materials that are presented in the textbooks seem to be contextual and provide students with tools to relate to real life situations. There is a listening section provided for the dialogues, which take place between two non-native English speakers from Syria. The names that are used for the dialogues are local names used in Syria. Localizing the language content often leads in better language acquisition (Tomlinson 2003), therefore the use of local names and places contributes to the success of English curricula in Syria. Not only the names in the book, but Syrian cultural elements are also used in presenting traditional family life, homes, and other places in Syria. There is not an emphasis to use English or American names and places until later in the elementary books, where new names and places outside of Syria are starting to be introduced. It is helpful for elementary school students to be introduced to English language first without the imposition of other cultures and then slowly introduce intercultural possibilities.

7 The Balance Between English and Other Languages

English is seen as an essential second language in Syria due to the political and economical power asserted by various Western countries such as France, England and the United States. Proficiency in English promises a better education, career and life. After Syria received its independence, "foreign language (option of English or French) was taught in grades seven through twelve" (Potter 1961). There was no difference between the status of English and the French language. English and French were taught according to individual choice. However, the language education has gone through some changes. English is taught from 1st grade as a second language and French language is taught from 7th grade as a foreign language. The

changes in language education in Syria infer that English language has gained a higher status than French over time. Due to the globalization, technological and economical advancement, English has gained a status as a dominant language in the world (Pennycook 1994).

Additionally, nearly 4000 Syrian students travel abroad to attend higher education institutions in Turkey, United States, and Europe. In our interview with a Syrian student, "American universities are more valued than European universities" (Interview transcript, 22.11.2013), since United States is seen a place of freedom and opportunities, and Syrian students know English, which is the medium of instruction in United States. In addition, consistent with Turkey, American higher education institutions also serve as a tool to gain higher status in society in Syria. Also, despite France's influence on Syria and its education, English's dominance overruled and became more influential in Syria. French is losing its power in Syria as it is taught from 7th grade, which is not a very suitable age for third language acquisition.

Contrary to English's dominance in education and other areas of life in Syria, French is more ascendant and presiding than English because politicians are mostly graduate students of French universities, which means people with French language background governs Syria. In our interview with a Syrian teacher, he stated that "even though French is used at the bureaucratic level, English language is the most prestigious language in Syria" (Interview transcript, 11.20.13).

Moreover, with technological developments and widespread use of social networking sites, English has been widely used by Syrians to stay current with the outside world. In addition to this, because of the current situation in Syria, Syrian people use social networking web sites to inform, acknowledge and announce things taking place there. As a result, English language has become a political tool for those who are trying to propagate their ideologies. Additionally, Western cultural influence is apparent in Syria, specifically American culture. Many of the Syrians have been under the influence of English music, movies and TV series. Neither subtitles nor dubbing is provided for movies and TV series, so Syrian people have to watch such films in their original language, English. As they watch, and listen to movies in English, consciously and subconsciously, Syrian people are exposed to cultural elements of Western culture, which leads them to modify their lives. As a result, Western cultures turn out to be more pivotal in daily life, since no localized elements are included in media imported from the West and this leads to direct exposure with influencing the culture.

To conclude, both English and French are utilized in varying purposes in Syria. While English is more powerful in aspects of education, culture and economics, French is prominent in terms of politics and internal affairs of Syria. However, social networking sites have diminished French language's importance and impact over Syria and its people. Although the curricula are localized to fit the needs of Syrians, there are many other factors that contribute to the widespread influence of the Western culture in society.

8   The Status of English Language in Syria

The dominance of English in Syria is very clear: English is studied as an obligatory subject starting from 1st grade in Syria. With English becoming the global and dominant language throughout the world, it has gained more importance. Although Syria has not had an official language policy of English language teaching, the strict curricula followed by the Ministry of Education has allowed for consistent teaching of English since the official start of the education system.

With the growing field of academia, English serves as the language of international research and publications. While English is the dominant language of science and technology in today's world, it also has become a dominant language in Syria. In Syria, the academics are required to reach proficiency in English to be proved by the test of IELTS or TOEFL in order to be promoted in their positions.

If we were to look at the sociopolitical context of Syria it is obvious to see the importance of English on the country's foreign language policy. Syria is geographically located in an important part of the world. The learning of English becomes essential in order to be included in the international communication. English in Syria serve both international and intranational functions (Kachru 1995). In Syria from the government's perspective, English mainly has been used to communicate with the global world, but not to become westernized, on the contrary the general public is moving toward Westernization. Syrian government specifically emphasized the importance of becoming part of the Arab culture. The wide use of English in Syria may not be necessarily influenced by external factors, but it may be due to internal needs of its people (Spolsky 2004). On the other hand, at the national level, English is a tool to gain access to better education and a career. Therefore, the desire to learn English serves as an instrument for betterment of the individual in promotion to a higher status, and for the intranational level to achieve competitiveness in the international arena.

Syria, in regard to the use and status of English language, belong to the "expanding circle" countries (Kachru 1992). English is taught as a foreign language in the school curriculum. Although English has not gained an official status as a language, it has an instrumental value in bringing prestige to people (Bamgbose 2003). Mainly the use of English has become critical in Syria due to the impact of globalization. While there has not been strong language policy implementation in Syria, as Tsui and Tollefson (2007) highlight, the adoption of a language as a medium of instruction is the strongest form of language intervention. In Syria the impact of globalization can clearly be seen in the adoption of English as a major subject of study starting in the elementary school. Although there were other languages in the past of the country, English has gained dominance and prevalence over the other foreign languages.

9   Conclusion

In this chapter, we have outlined a brief history of Syria, its historical overview of education policies including the language education policy. First we have provided a brief history of Syria as a country and its language and culture. Then, we touched upon the current situation in Syria and discussed its implications for education. Next, we provided an outline of Syria's education policies at large and specifically the language policies. In the last part of the chapter, we compared and contrasted the language education policies between Syria and Turkey, as we believe that both countries are in critical positions.

As we have described in detail, Syria's education and language policies have been mainly effected by political influences before and after its independence. Until Syria gained its independence as a sovereign country, French was first the influential language that was imposed on Syrians; however, only the elite were able to access education then. After American University was opened there were many missionary schools that taught English language. After Syria's independence, there was no education policy until the government stabilized in the 1970's. The first policy for education was written in the 1973 under the government. As the Syrian government became more stable, they increased funding for education in the 1980s and 1990s and made schooling mandatory for ages 6–12. Then the last reform in the education was enacted in 2002 to mandate schooling for pupils ages 6–15 years old. After the latest education policy, English has been taught starting from grade 1. The Syrian Ministry of Education has been in charge of the curricula and textbooks. The textbooks that are used in schools are all standard and as we have described in the chapter, there is an emphasis to teach phonetics, listening and pronunciation. This is partly due to the differences in Arabic and English language.

Education plays the most essential role in the success of a country. Within the general education, language learning is also a critical tool for communication within the global world. Although French has been politically influential in Syria, the importance of the French language has faded and with the increased use of English, the teaching of it has also gained importance in Syria. Given the fact that English has now become significant part of foreign language teaching, the Syrian government has taken some initiatives to create a consistent and standard teaching of the English language.

Language policy of English language has some implications for planning. Although the Syrian Ministry of Education strictly controls the curricula and the textbooks, foreign language teachers have crucial responsibilities to implement the curricula. They should be well-trained and professionally competent in order to match the policy rhetoric into classroom practice. With the support of the policy makers, the teachers should be given opportunities to stay up-to-date with the latest teaching methods. Once Syria as a country starts revitalizing, it is our hope that in planning the new education policies the government will be concerned with putting forth the effort providing ample resources and funding for education. In order for a country to flourish, the government has to be concerned with educating its citizens who will be adopt and learn new language skills at different levels in their educational lives.

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