

In Syria, the Real Foreign Policy Is Written in the Classroom

Over the past year, Syria has become a focus of global attention. After decades of authoritarian rule under the Assad dynasty, marked by repression, civil war, and widespread human rights abuses, the regime finally collapsed, ending one of the Middle East's most entrenched family dynasties. In the wake of Assad's fall, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), rose to power, positioning itself as the legitimate successor and promising a future of stability and reform that had long been denied to Syrians. HTS is a jihadist group that grew out of al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Its leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, has sought to rebrand himself from militant commander to political figure, moving away from al-Qaeda, and presenting HTS as a governing authority rather than simply an insurgent movement.

Among Al-Sharaa's first acts was a sweeping reform of the education system, an early signal of how the new regime hopes to shape Syria's post-Assad identity. IMPACT-se has studied these reforms closely, as education often serves as both a practical tool for reconstruction and a powerful instrument of ideology in war-torn societies.

The political transition has ushered in a relative calm after years of conflict, but it has also shifted attitudes towards Syria in the wider world. Global powers are now reassessing Syria's role in the international order and weighing the possibilities of new alliances. While many Western governments have cautiously welcomed the new leadership's rhetoric of reform and openness to partnership, the picture is more complex. Elements of the new curriculum reflect strategic efforts to align with Turkey and embed anti-Western sentiment, raising concerns that beneath the promises of progress lie the seeds of a more troubling agenda. Other new elements being included in the new curriculum seek to ostracize women and minorities as well as Islamize secular elements of the curriculum, including scientific concepts such as evolution. These developments underscore the need for careful monitoring of Syria's educational direction as a barometer of the regime's true ambitions.

This article will begin by examining Syria's re-emergence on the international stage, focusing on Al-Sharaa's recent address at the UN General Assembly and the subsequent lifting of international sanctions. It will then turn to the domestic sphere, analyzing the Syrian education system under new government directives. By doing so, the article assesses what the content of the education system reveals about Syria's underlying attitudes toward Western values, particularly in light of its evolving alliance with Turkey, considering what this implies for Syria's prospective alignment with the West.

Syria in international relations

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Assad's government was diplomatically ostracized by most Western countries and much of the Arab world. It was subject to many economic and political sanctions, and became reliant on diplomatic outcasts such as Russia and Iran for military backing.

However, with the dawn of the new regime, many western countries have dropped their sanctions from the Assad era. In the US, Trump ordered a cessation of sanctions via an Executive Order in June 2025 to give "Syrians a chance at greatness."¹ From a list of previously sanctioned Syrians, the US claimed that all their property and interests in the US are now unblocked, stating that the goal of

¹ US Department of State, "Termination of Syria Sanctions," Office of the Spokesperson, June 2025
<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/06/termination-of-syria-sanctions>

sanctions was to bring about a positive change in behavior. The decision to lift sanctions reflects the perception that the new regime is a viable partner for Western countries, and it now has a critical opportunity to demonstrate its suitability for such allyship.

To corroborate this shift, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, the new Syrian leader, was invited to address the UN General Assembly in September 2025, marking the first time in sixty years that a Syrian representative spoke before global leaders, following decades of diplomatic isolation under the Assad regime. In his speech, Al-Sharaa pledged that Syria would “write a new chapter entitled peace, prosperity and development,” signaling his intention to position the country on a trajectory of modernity and reconstruction. He expressed gratitude to Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states, as well as to the EU and the United States, for their engagement with Syria. This broad list of acknowledgements reflects the regime’s dual ambitions: on the one hand, cultivating ties with Western powers, while simultaneously deepening its relationship with non-Western powers, notably Turkey.

These dynamics are also evident in IMPACT-se’s analysis of Syria’s new curricular directives, where references to the Ottoman Empire have been notably softened. This shift underscores the symbolic importance of Turkey to Syria’s evolving identity. However, it raises the question of whether Syria’s embrace of Turkey is compatible with its professed Western alignment. Trends within the Syrian curriculum provide a critical indicator of the regime’s priorities and will be instrumental in revealing the direction in which the country intends to move.

IMPACT-se’s Syria report

Turkey:

A recent IMPACT-se [Syria report](#) analyzes the regime’s declared educational reforms, introduced within its first weeks in power, to assess their impact on the country’s education system. These early changes provide a revealing window into the regime’s core priorities and ideological trajectory. They include a directive for the removal of negative references to the Ottoman empire.

Directive 2 stipulates that any content discussing the Ottoman Empire should refer to it as a “regime” or “sultanate” rather than an “occupation,” which marks an interesting change insinuating a difference in tack regarding relations with Turkey.² Ideologically, this change could be consistent with the Islamification of textbook content, as the Ottoman sultan held the title caliph, linking him to the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad. On a geopolitical level, this change may indicate that the new HTS regime will seek support from its neighbor *Türkiye* (Turkey); the change could therefore be regarded as instrumental in creating a new regional reality.

The document of directives for curricular changes was published in January 2025, and contained several examples of how textbooks should be changed.

² CNN Arabic, "Syria Controversy Over Curriculum Changes Made by the Ministry of Education," January 1, 2025,

<https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2025/01/01/syria-controversy-over-curriculum-changes-made-by-the-ministry-of-education>

٢- اعتماد عبارة الحكم العثماني بدلاً من عبارة الاحتلال العثماني أينما وجدت.

1) Use the term “the Ottoman regime” instead of “Ottoman occupation”, wherever it is found.

Example 1

نص (أدب المقاومة) لنجاح العطار	٣٨-٣٩-٤٠		اللغة العربية
فقرة "رأى جور العثمانيين" و "في ظل سلطة عثمانية غاشمة"	٧٨		طبعة ٢٠٢٣-٢٠٢٤ ، قد تختلف بعض

[The intended omission]	[Page]	[Grade]	[Subject]
The [first] passage, [remove from] “experienced the injustice of the Ottomans” to “in the shade of a tyrannical Ottoman rule”	78	[Grade 3 Secondary, Literary Track]	Arabic Language, 2023-2024 edition

A previous Arabic Language textbook includes a lesson on Syrian diaspora literature, attributing the emigration of authors to economic pressure from the “injustice and oppression” of the Ottoman empire exercised against Arabs. The amendment outlined by the new Ministry of Education suggests removing a passage that presents the Ottomans in a negative light.

١. نشأة الأدب المهجري:

منذ أواخر القرن التاسع عشر شرعت مواكب المهاجرين العرب تنزح إلى المهاجر الأمريكية، ولاسيما من سورية ولبنان؛ فعزا بعض الباحثين هجرتهم إلى طموح كامن في طبيعتهم منحدر إليهم بالفطرة من أجداد جابوا القفار وخاضوا البحار، وإلى ما اكتسبوه من مرونة وقدرة على التكيف السريع في أي محيط نزلوه، وذهب آخرون في تفسير عوامل الهجرة إلى العامل الاقتصادي، فقد عاشوا في ظل سلطنة عثمانية غاشمة، نال عليها حكومات استبدادية فاسدة استحلّت الأرواق ونهبت الثروات. وهناك من رأى جور العثمانيين وما مارسوه من صنوف القهر والتعذيب بحق العرب سبباً لهجرة المهاجرين الذين عجز عليهم أن يعيشوا أسرى الظلم والعوز، فانطلقوا يبحثون عن الحرية والاكتفاء، وكان بين الذين نزحوا عن شاطئ البحر المتوسط إلى شتات العالم الجديد في المهاجر الأمريكية جماعة من الشباب الذين حملوا بين جوانحهم قلوباً متولبة إلى الحرية والإنصاف، وامتلكوا فكراً تيراً وخيالاً خصباً. أولئك هم الأدباء المثقفون الذين شكّلوا بتأجيلهم الأدبي أدب المهجر.

1. Title: “The Origin of the Diaspora Literature”

“[...] Other [researchers] tended to explain the reasons for immigration as economic, for they [Syrian writers] have lived under a brutal Ottoman sultanate ruled by despotic and corrupt governments one after the other, which deemed [people’s] livelihoods and plundering resources permissible. (The following has been removed): There are [people] who saw the Ottomans’ injustice and the kinds of oppression and torture they exercised against the Arabs as a reason for the immigration of those who had lived under the great difficulty of [being] prisoners of injustice and destitution, and so they set out in search of freedom and sufficiency.” [...]

Source: Arabic Language and Literature, Grade 3 Secondary Literary Track, 2023-2024, p. 78.

While the directives concerning references to the Ottoman Empire might appear inconsequential at first glance, they may signal the regime's intent to cultivate closer ties with Turkey. Such a move may compromise hopes of a closer alignment with Western values, given [Turkey's trajectory](#) under President Erdoğan, marked by an erosion of democratic institutions, restrictions on press freedom, and the promotion of a more Islamist-leaning political identity. Given this, IMPACT-se's work on Syrian textbooks will be helpful in ascertaining the new regime's relationship with western values.

The West:

Some anti-Western content was deliberately retained in the curriculum; although it was not introduced through formal directives, its continued inclusion is nevertheless significant. Western countries are depicted in virulent terms, as violent, blood-thirsty, oppressive warmongers and arms dealers. A particularly concerning change by the new regime highlights negative attitudes towards Jews and Christians; for example, a Quranic exegesis links the phrases 'those who have evoked [God's] anger' and 'those who are astray' to Jews and Christians respectively, a reading that casts adherents of these faiths in a hostile light. While both phrases are derogatory, the projection of Jews as those who anger God echoes longstanding antisemitic tropes. In addition, Western countries, particularly the United States, are criticized in a Grade 11 Arabic language textbook through the introduction to a poem that attacks 'the Free World' and 'their dollars,' accusing them of deceiving nations, devouring them, and feeding on the blood of innocents.

مدخل إلى النص:

لم يجنِ الإنسان من الحروب إلا الويلات والدمار والقتل، فكان
السلام هو الحلم الذي يداعب خيال الشعوب والهدف الذي تسعى
إلى تحقيقه. ولكن تجار الأسلحة وسماسرة القيم وأعداء الإنسانية
يحاولون دائماً إشعال الحروب لأنهم يقتاتون على دماء الأبرياء
ويسعون إلى خداع الشعوب بالشعارات البراقة، كما يسعون إلى
شراء الذمم الرخيصة بالأموال، ولا يعرف المخدوعون أن تلك
الشعارات أفعى خبيثة ملمسها ناعم ونابها مسموم.

وعندما تهدد الحرب الوطن الغالي يقف الشاعر الملتزم قضايا
أمته في وجه الحرب فيمجد السلام، ويفضح ادعاءات المستعمرين
وشعاراتهم جاعلاً من شعره منارة تهدي شعبه عند الملمات.

Introduction to the text:

Man has not earned from wars anything but disasters, destruction, and death, while peace is the dream that tempts the imaginations of peoples, and the goal they aspire to achieve. But the arms

dealers, those who trade away values, and the enemies of humanity always try to ignite wars, because they feed on the blood of the innocent. They aspire to deceive nations with shiny slogans and to buy cheap guarantees of protection with money, and those who are deceived don't know that these slogans are like an evil snake, which is soft to the touch, but whose fangs are venomous.

As the war threatens the precious homeland, the poet, who is committed to the causes of his nation, stands in the face of war and praises peace. He exposes the false claims of the colonizers and their slogans, turning his poetry to a lighthouse which guides his nation at a time of disasters.

٦ قُلْ لِمَنْ يَزْعُمُونَ عَالَمَهُمْ حُرّاً أَحُرُّ يَسْتَعْبِدُ الْإِنْسَانَا؟
٧ كَمْ خَدَعْتُمْ (بِالْعَالَمِ الْحُرِّ) شُعْباً وَالتَّهْمْتُمْ عَلَى اسْمِهِ أَوْطَانَا
٨ قَدْ عَجْنَا (دُولَارَكُم) وَخَبَزْنَاهُ فَكَانَ التَّزْوِيرَ وَالْبُهْتَانَا
٩ يَهَبُ الشَّعْبَ بِالْيَسَارِ وَيُؤْنَاهُ تَجْزُ الْوَرِيدَ وَالشَّرِيَانَا

Tell those who claim their world is free: Do the free enslave [other] people?

How many nations have you deceived with [the term] "the free world", using it to devour homelands.

We know your dollars well – they are forgery and lies.

They give a nation [benefits] with their left hand, while their right hand cuts its veins and arteries.

The imagery likens the West to venomous snakes, warmongers, and exploiters of weaker nations. In light of this, it is questionable where Syria positions itself in relation to Western values. These factors cast doubt on the sincerity of the regime's apparent Western-leaning rhetoric.

Minorities:

The Western values that al-Sharaa's regime claims to embrace are not reflected in the curriculum reforms. Syria's diverse minority communities remain largely absent from the curriculum. While the issuance of new directives created an opportunity to promote inclusivity and reflect the country's social and religious diversity, the regime has so far failed to incorporate these groups into the educational narrative, reinforcing a narrow vision of national identity. There is a clear conflict between the regime's outward appeals to Western liberal values and the intolerant messaging embedded in its educational materials. Such an overtly exclusionary exegesis, introduced at the earliest stages of schooling, is likely to shape young children's perceptions of minority religions in profoundly harmful ways.

In addition, the new directives emphasize the removal of female figures from textbooks. While the new regime has not announced any formal policies regarding gender or the portrayal of women, illustrations featuring women used to demonstrate educational concepts have been instructed to be removed; in many of the images in question, the women were not wearing a hijab. Although the directives do not specify reasons for most of these omissions, the overall pattern indicates a deliberate exclusion of women who are not dressed in accordance with traditional Islamic norms from the curriculum. This approach is notably out of step with the Western values the Syrian regime claims to

uphold in its public messaging abroad, raising serious questions about whether its professed liberal positions in Western spheres correspond to any reality on the ground.



Image: English, 2023-2024, Grade 1 Secondary, Student's Book, p. 77. The above image is an example of the content slated for removal under the new directives.

Al-Sharaa publicly presents himself as a leader committed to protecting minorities and embracing Western-aligned values of tolerance, yet these promises are not reflected in the educational reforms introduced under his rule. Early in his leadership in January 2025, he [pledged](#) to establish an “inclusive transitional government” representing diverse communities, language clearly aimed at reassuring international audiences. But the textbook changes implemented by his government move in the opposite direction: rather than promoting inclusion, they reinforce intolerant narratives and negative portrayals of minority groups. This disconnect is further underscored by events on the ground. In July 2025, sectarian violence in Sweida Province escalated into deadly clashes between Druze fighters and Bedouin militias, prompting al-Sharaa to [renew public pledges](#) to protect minorities. Yet the content of the curriculum shows that these commitments are largely rhetorical. While he signals tolerance to Western partners, the educational materials propagated under his administration continue to promote exclusivist interpretations of Islam and hostile framing of minorities, demonstrating that his professed values are not borne out in policy or practice.

The trajectory of Syria under Al-Sharaa presents a paradox. On the international stage, the lifting of sanctions and the regime’s outreach to the UN suggest a willingness to embrace Western engagement and present itself as a constructive partner. Yet, within the classroom, the reforms reveal a more ambivalent picture: hostility towards Western nations, negative portrayals of Jews and Christians, and softened depictions of the Ottoman Empire that point to a strategic embrace of Turkey. Taken together, these developments suggest that while the new Syria seeks legitimacy and partnership from the West, it is simultaneously deepening ties with Islamist-leaning states. The result is a dual orientation, outwardly courting Western acceptance, while ideologically laying foundations that are anti-Western in tone. The Syrian curriculum is thus not only a reflection of the regime’s identity but also a key predictor of where the country intends to go.