

Syrian School

A school system on the brink of change in an often misunderstood country.



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Programme running: 5 x 60 mins Production: Lion TV/BBC

Despite rarely finding itself out of the headlines, the Middle East is frequently misunderstood. Syrian School goes beyond the clichés to meet the human face of a fast growing young population, whose government is modernising the education system to encourage a generation of children able to think for themselves. This unique series looks at a fascinating country through the eyes of its schoolchildren, their families and their teachers.

Changing Schools

It's the start of the new school year, which this year coincides with the beginning of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month. Passionate head teacher Amal Hassan has been in charge of Zaki Al-Arsuzi Girls' Secondary School for over a decade. She expects a lot of her girls and is surprised that so many are now wearing the hijab.

A highlight of this first term is the visit to the school of the young and fashionable wife of the Syrian President, to inspire the girls at a business workshop at the school.

At Benin Jaramana Boys' School, we meet another new pupil, Yusif Androus. He is a Christian Iraqi refugee who has come to Damascus from Baghdad following the murder of his oldest brother. Syria provides Iraqis with free education but Yusif struggles to fit in and to get over his fear of loud bangs following his experiences in Baghdad.

Rap Refugees

At first sight Yarmouk looks like a normal suburb of Damascus. But it's a refugee camp; full of tightly packed departments and home to many second and third generation Palestinian refugees. This film focuses on the girls' school and in particular on the remarkable story of two girls, Shaza and Rahaf, who want to publicise the Palestinian cause through rap. It puts them on a collision course with both their head

teacher, who thinks rap is an inappropriate way to tell the Palestinian story, and their families who don't want their daughters to be stepping out of line this way. In a powerful story the two girls take us to the heart of what it is like to be a young Palestinian living in Syria.

Being Inspired

Mr. Mohammed is one of the most popular teachers at Zaki Al-Arsuzi Girls' School. He teaches classical Arabic, but also runs an innovative poetry writing club outside the curriculum. Here the girls get to pour their hearts out on the page and in public – love poetry is one of their favourite topics. Ala'a, recently rejected by a boy she was interested in, who expresses her intense disappointment in verse. Along with the other girls, Ala'a is preparing for an unusual poetry showcase, when they will all perform in front of some of Syria's foremost literary figures.

At a boys' primary school on the edge of Damascus, 10 year old Wassim and Abdullah are battling to be top of the class in the latest exams. The one with the highest marks gets to make a victory lap in front of the rest of the school.

Syria's Got Talent

Ward is Syrian Junior Chess Champion and a gifted child. Now he is travelling with the adult Syrian team to Beirut to take part in the Asian International Championships.

A small group of boys at the rural primary school have been selected to represent their school in the Ba'ath Party Pioneers Competition. It's a way for the ruling party to encourage the top students, see who could be a good representative of their country and ensure that the party's message of socialism (fast evolving to a free market version) is reinforced in top students. But the Pioneer competition subjects are very broad. Can Wassim and Imad win through with their cardboard models of mosques?

Image: Khonji, iStock.

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