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Russian Language to Be Taught at Syrian Schools

By The Moscow Times

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Syrian schools will offer Russian language courses to their students in the next academic year, giving teenagers in the war-torn country an alternative to French, the Syrian Education Ministry said.

Syrian children have to start learning English in elementary school, and pick up French as a second foreign language in the fifth grade, but will soon be able to pick Russian instead, the ministry said in a statement, AFP reported Monday.

"By the next school year, the ministry will have completed all the preparations to begin teaching Russian language at its institutions," Education Minister Hazwane Wazz said.

This apparent demonstration of closer ties with Russia follows Moscow's staunch support for Syrian President Bashar Assad's government, in the face of French sympathies with the opposition forces.

Syria was a French colony until 1943, but fluency in the language is mostly limited to the academic elite, with many Syrian post-graduate students going to universities in France. The number of French speakers in Syria is estimated at 5,000 people, AFP reported.

A much larger Russian-speaking population lives in Syria now, including about 30,000 Russians, mostly Russian women who married Syrian men, according to official estimates. Many Syrian military officers also studied in Russia during the Soviet era.

Besides ethnic Russians who arrived in recent decades, Syria is home to many descendants of people from the North Caucasus — mostly Circassians, whose ancestors fled to the Middle East after the 19th century tsarist conquest of the Caucasus.

After the Syrian civil war started, dozens of Syrian Circassians applied for Russian citizenship, but Russia's Regional Development Ministry said last year that they don't qualify, partly because they couldn't speak Russian, Izvestia reported.

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