

The Educational Process in North and East Syria Background Paper

November 2020

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The Questions to be Studied in this Research Paper

This paper presents the main characteristics of the education system in Northeast Syria, mainly the inputs of this process – curricula and structure – and outputs correspond to that, such as the knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it discusses the social, political, and economical implications and the stability in that region.

Methodology

This research paper is based on interviews with

- Two high-level officials responsible for education
 - Three researchers at two local research centers, specialized in the education and development sector in the Northeast Syria.
 - residents, of different social and ethnic backgrounds
- Focus of the Research Paper

This paper will discuss four interrelated points:

- Overview of the education process in northeast Syria, with regards to the structure of institutions, education workforce, and curricula.
- levels and reasons of local satisfaction with the educational process .
- Political factors surrounding the educational process, which prevent solutions that could increase public satisfaction.
- Practical recommendations that could be implemented in the foreseeable future, considering the positions of political parties and the demands of locals.

1) The Structure of Education in North and East Syria

Hierarchy

In the first three levels of study – primary, preparatory, and secondary – there are about 800,000 students in northeastern Syria, from among a population totaling about four million living in this region. About one third of these are internally displaced Syrians coming from other parts of Syria. The geographic and administrative structure in the region is split into distinct areas, within which there is not a unified educational process nor the same curricula: the cantons of Jazeera, Deir al-Zour, Raqqa, and the regions of Manbij and Shahba (the area between the region of Afrin and areas under control of the Syrian regime north of the city of Aleppo).

These students' study in about 4300 schools throughout these areas. About 39,000 teachers and administrators run this process. Most of these schools previously belonged to the Syrian ministry of education, and the Autonomous Administration renovated about half of them, though they are still below the standard for a functioning school with regards to space, facilities, supplies, and teaching materials, including playgrounds, laboratories, and libraries. The infrastructure varies between rural and urban areas, whereby rural schools are of worse structural quality. There is also a difference in the extent of damage to the area during the war.

In the cities of Hassakah and Qamishli, because of the relative influence of the Syrian regime, there are about thirty schools under the administration of the central Syrian Ministry of Education, full of students, and teaching the curriculum belonging to the ministry. There are also about 25 private church schools which teach various curricula depending on whether they fall into areas under regime control or not.

Structure of the Curriculum

There are three school curricula taught in the areas of north and east Syria, varying by geographical location:

In the Jazira region, which encompasses the province of Hassakah, the region of Kobani (Ain al-Arab) and the Shahba region (north of Aleppo city), the Kurdish curriculum of the Autonomous Administration is taught. This curriculum, which was composed by the Autonomous Administration in cooperation with education specialists, has been subjected to several changes of the past years, and will be discussed more fully later in this report.

In the Euphrates region, which includes the provinces of Deir al-Zour and Raqqa, the UNICEF curriculum is taught. This curriculum is generally used during wartime and consists of basic subjects such as language, math, and science. The Autonomous Administration has vowed to change this in the coming years and lay out mechanisms and educational institutions to encompass all needs. It has not been able to do this because these areas were recently liberated from extremist organizations, and as such the educational process has been delayed.

In Manbij, the Syrian regime's curriculum is taught, with the exception of some subjects and lessons in religious or national education which they say incite hatred or violence.

Regarding the language of teaching, there are supporters of giving priority to the mother tongue, where students are taught on the following three principles:

Students of each ethnic group are taught in their mother tongue for the first three years of study.

Starting in the fourth year, another local language is added alongside the mother tongue – Arabic or Syriac for Kurdish students and Kurdish or Syriac for Arab students – and the proportion of studies in the local language is around 40%, with the rest in the student’s mother tongue.

Foreign languages are introduced from the fifth year, where the foreign language and the second local language comprise about half of linguistic subjects, with the other half in the mother tongue.

Regarding content, there are three different levels of content within the educational curricula in the areas east of the Euphrates, especially in the Jazira region, which teach the curricula of the Autonomous Administration. These curricula are distinguished from the simplified UNICEF curricula used in Deir al-Zour and Raqqa, or the curricula of the regime used in Manbij:

There is a knowledge/scientific level in educational subjects such as math or physics similar to the regime’s curricula. The senior administrative bodies in the administration call for students in their educational institutions to be able to advance to the intermediate or upper degrees in regime institutions at any time, and obtain an equivalent scientific level of that of a student in the regime institution, all else being equal.

The humanities in the Autonomous Administration’s curriculum east of the Euphrates use modern scientific theories removed entirely from religious justifications, specifically regarding gender equality and private and public freedoms. It also includes an explanation of the development of history, especially contemporary history, in line with the theories of ‘the brotherhood of peoples’ and ‘the democratic nation’, which the administration says it is guided by. All ethnicities, religions, and cultural sensitivities are recognized, and the teaching includes a detailed description of the histories of these cultural sensitivities. This occurs even in subjects of spiritual education, where spiritual and cultural subjects are taught rather than religious education, though this is somewhat overlooked in the Euphrates region.

There was previously a strong presence of the theories, sayings, and views of the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan, but that was greatly reduced in the last two years. Currently there is only some mention of his political and intellectual journey in some history subjects. The senior bodies in the Autonomous Administration say that this is being reviewed currently, and that the curricula will be free of any political ideology.

Structure of the Educational Workforce

There are about 39,000 teachers and administrators in the educational process in northeastern Syria. It is estimated that half of this workforce has received university degrees, whereas the other half have received degrees from public intermediary or secondary institutes. However, they have all received training from the educational institutions belonging to the Autonomous Administration, and there is a specific institute for teaching the Kurdish language which belongs to the Movement for a Democratic Society.

There are four mechanisms by which this educational workforce was developed and brought into the educational process:

In the first years of the administration in 2014 and 2015, there was a nonprofessional workforce in place, because the foundation for the upper administrative bodies at the time was to prepare and move forward with the process of teaching the Kurdish language. Teachers were given training courses lasting three to six months and introduced into the educational workforce.

Teachers from the Syrian regime's educational organization make up about half of the teaching workforce currently.

There are about 15,000 teachers who graduated from the intermediary institutes and colleges tied to the Autonomous Administration, specifically at Rojava and Kobani Universities. Most of these teach in the Jazira region.

The upper level administrative workforce is appointed based on loyalty, ties, and political affiliation.

2) Public Approval

The level of public approval of the educational process in northeastern Syria cannot be determined exactly, as there are no professional surveys to that end. And because most of those tied to the educational process do not have many alternative choices, the level of satisfaction and acceptance cannot be accurately determined.

Nonetheless there are three indications that public satisfaction with the educational process is less than what the upper administrations determine it to be, for reasons that shall be explained in the following:

The few schools that are still run by the Syrian education ministry in the cities of Qamishli and Hassakah are full of students, and students go to those schools from all neighborhoods within those cities despite the presence of Autonomous Administration schools in their neighborhoods. These offer a preferable educational climate and teaching staff, and there are students that come from other cities to these schools.

Many of the Syrian Kurdish refugees living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, who number around 300,000 displaced, complain that one of the main reasons that they don't want to return to their areas is their lack of confidence in the educational process in their areas of northeastern Syria.

The rate of those dropping out of the educational process is higher than it has been traditionally. The proportion of students in the educational process relative to the population is less than what it was before the Syrian revolution. (There are no indicators or surveys of dropout rates in areas under control of the Syrian regime, the Syrian opposition, or extremist groups).

Reasons for Dissatisfaction

Reasons for popular dissatisfaction with the educational process in northeastern Syria vary based on the geography and the social/ethnic sensitivities of each area, though there are factors in common for that dissatisfaction across those boundaries. These can be characterized into four levels:

1- Legitimacy

The largest segment of the various social groups believe that the educational process does not have any future payoff, regardless of the level and content of the education itself. The parents wonder what will happen to their children after they finish all their pre-university studies, since there is no recognition from the legitimate Syrian government, or by other countries, organizations, or regional and international educational authorities.

The issue of legitimacy applies to various groups in northeastern Syria, because legitimacy is tied to economics and other educational outcomes including the obtaining of social position and climbing the social ladder, and this stems from university degrees.

The senior administrations in the educational process say that they are working with international powers and organizations in northeastern Syria to put pressure on the Syrian regime to at least partially recognize the educational process in northeastern Syria, and that they are also working to create interaction and cooperation between educational institutions in the area and their international counterparts.

However, all rounds of negotiations and communication between the institutions of northeastern Syria and the Syrian regime have not led to any result. The Syrian regime has showed more flexibility in the economic and military realms, and even politically, than it has shown in the education portfolio. It has continued to refuse entirely any recognition or cooperation with the educational institutions of the Autonomous Administration in the areas east of the Euphrates.

2- Language

A segment of Kurdish popular opinion holds that the use of Kurdish as a primary language of instruction, and the use of Arabic and English as secondary languages, deprives their children of the opportunity to learn a “global” language professionally, and they say that the Kurdish language does not meet that requirement currently.

Similarly, Arab public opinion has a sensitivity towards teaching their children Kurdish, even later and as an optional subject, and they believe that their children should only learn in Arabic, in addition to English.

Officials in the administration of the educational process in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria say that the mechanisms for determining the educational process are open to review, and insist that it is the right of students to study in the mother tongue from the beginning of their education. For the Autonomous Administration this right is absolute, especially in literary subjects rather than scientific subjects.

3- Content

Kurdish and Syriac public opinion have not shown any resentment towards the content of the curricula, unlike Arab public opinion, which has openly expressed its dissatisfaction with the content of the subjects taught, especially in the Jazira region where the Autonomous Administration curriculum is specifically taught.

Reasons for Arab rejection of the educational content in the northeast of the country:

- They do not believe the curricula consider religious sensitivities, given that the content presents all religions, sects, and beliefs, and their natural development in the region. It does not give priority or special sanctity to the Islamic religion, and specifically the Sunni sect.
- The content has a preference towards gender equality between men and women, in all levels of culture, society, and politics, which this segment of society considers offensive to its social and cultural sensibilities regarding the structure of the family and male authority, including tribal authority.
- The content includes historical information that recognizes the complex and shared development of history in this region, including the Kurdish oppression and the foundation of the modern state of Syria on part of the land and historical area of the Kurdish majority, which provokes underlying national sensitivities among the majority of Arabs.

Ideological Organization

There is a faction of Kurdish public opinion specifically who do not support the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and who believe that the educational system in the areas north and east of the Euphrates is using some of its mechanisms to promote the politics and ideology of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and that their children are being drawn into the organizations of that party.

The senior administrations of the educational process in the Autonomous Administration deny this, both regarding the content of the curricula and the presence of children's institutions that resemble the youth organizations and "Pioneers of the Baath" (Tala'i al-Baath) that the Syrian regime used and still uses. They also deny that students are dropping out to join any military or political organizations belonging to any political faction.

According to eye witness accounts, none of these organizations have appeared in schools, but it also cannot be disregarded outright that the teaching workforce influence students politically through their educational institutions.

3) The Political Factions Interested in the Educational Process

There are four effective political actors in northeastern Syria, each with its own tools and dynamics for dealing with the educational process, and each with its own aspirations and goals.

Democratic Union Party (PYD)

This party has the most influence in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and is considered the political actor from which the administration took its political project. Because of that it considers itself to have the primary stake in the continuation of the administration.

The PYD considers the educational process an essential part of its legitimacy in governing the area because through it the party controls one of the most vital institutions in society, and therefore controls the administrative functions of about a quarter of the bureaucracy in the entire governance structure of the area.

The PYD believes that after a number of years the educational process in northeastern Syria will turn into a de facto reality that cannot be denied by any side, including the Syrian regime, and through that it will be a part of the Syrian political bargain to end the war. As such, international institutions will surely recognize it and cooperate with it. In this sense, the PYD considers the current form of the educational process to be a tool to assert its legitimacy and social influence, now and in the future.

Kurdish National Council (ENKS)

The Kurdish National Council asserts that public dissatisfaction with the educational process, especially in the Kurdish community, is one of the most important weak points of its political opponent, the PYD.

The Kurdish National Council accuses the PYD of creating estrangement with the structure of the Syrian state, the only holder of legitimacy, and that this is not in the interest of Syrian Kurds because it pushes them to emigrate or leave the educational process.

The Kurdish National Council is working to present alternatives that it sees as appropriate, because of its belief that this will bring segments of the population closer to it, especially by working to allow students to take official exams for preparatory and secondary degrees, allowing them to gain entry to government institutes and universities.

The Kurdish National Council has presented this in ongoing negotiations with the PYD, specifically the addition of some subjects in the Kurdish language to the educational process.

Syrian Regime

The Syrian regime is working to undermine the legitimacy of the Autonomous Administration in all forms, and it believes that the educational process is the most important foundation of those efforts. As such, the political and media apparatuses tied to the regime continue to spread doubt about the educational process, considering it an attempt to separate a part of Syria from the other areas. The Syrian regime also has a strict belief in Arab nationalism – Baathism – which considers education in the Kurdish language to be an affront to central nationalist ideology.

The Syrian regime is working to tarnish every detail within the educational process and refuses any form of cooperation or legitimacy to the process that would consist of a recognition of the Autonomous Administration and its institutions. Additionally, it sends clear signals to its supporters that it will return to govern these areas, and that its educational institutions alone will be given legitimacy and be integrated into the state's institutions in the future.

International Coalition

The forces of the international coalition have a real interest in the dynamic, productive, and effective continuation of the educational process in northeastern Syria because that process is one of the foundations of social peace, whether within social groups themselves or between various groups.

The fundamental issue is that the coalition does not have a strategic political plan for this region to go alongside its military and security project, except for its current shepherding of the dialogue between Kurdish political forces. Because of that the coalition cannot commit to obtaining legitimacy for this process, and it does not have mechanisms and strategies to support the educational process.

4) Recommendations

In the following section we will present practical recommendations for the educational process, taking into consideration the political and security situation in the area which affects the entire process. Additionally, these recommendations will attempt to be responsive to all fears and sensitivities for social groups in the region, considering the factors that have caused dissatisfaction with the educational process.

The Autonomous Administration must form a specialized committee to review the curricula, relying on experts nominated by those involved in the intra-Kurdish dialogue, as well as those who are in dialogue with the Autonomous Administration within the framework of the Syrian Democratic Council and similar initiatives. This committee would be given the authority to

make practical recommendations regarding the curricula and the way in which they are taught, as well as the difficulties facing each of those decisions, to be considered later on. This would exploit the readiness of all sides involved to cooperate and would give time to the committee to complete its study.

Here are some practical recommendations that can be implemented:

Adjust the curricula to be more in line with the central/legitimate educational process.

The Autonomous Administration can adjust its current curricula to be in line with the Syrian education ministry by replacing ideological subjects, such as history and national and religious education, which would ease the integration down the road with Syrian educational subjects and allow graduates to enter Syrian universities. This would prevent political conditions from affecting the future of the students as long as they are receiving the same scientific information as other Syrian students.

Open testing centers so that students can take exams for preparatory and secondary degrees.

The administration can allow special centers to be opened throughout the region for students to take exams for preparatory and secondary degrees specific to the Syrian education ministry, so that students can have the choice to take their exams in these centers or in the institutions of the Autonomous Administration, or in some cases in both.

If this step were taken along with the previous recommendation, the scientific level of knowledge among students will allow them to obtain preparatory and secondary degrees recognized by the Syrian education ministry.

Partial Translation of the Curricula to Kurdish and Syriac for Students from These Communities.

By translating some of the curriculum, equaling about a third of the total content, they remove the argument of a language barrier for Kurdish and Arab students alike, and still signal that the administration respects local languages and the rights of students to learn their mother tongues to an appropriate level. At the same time, it allows students to acquire a good level in appropriate global languages throughout their studies.

Encourage Societal Dialogue Regarding Education

The issue of education can be subjected to societal dialogue through open workshops, meetings, and conferences to discuss the issue of education and the future of the educational process, curricula, and academic degrees. This dialogue should not be limited to a particular political

side, but rather be open to specialists in the field of education, administrators, teachers, and advanced students. Outside expertise can also be brought in, particularly from countries that have experienced similar crises.

The issue of societal dialogue contributes to education by removing this portfolio from its political context and instead considering it a technical, service, and social issue that concerns all classes, segments, and groups of the region. This removes it from the question of political competition.

Give Permits to Private Schools and Educational Institutions.

Private schools can be licensed, and a supervising directorate can be created to oversee these schools to guarantee that they receive permission from the Autonomous Administration by meeting the conditions of instruction in the Kurdish language to Kurdish students in their first years of study, in addition to Arabic and English. It would also meet the conditions of instruction for the Syrian education ministry in later years, specifically secondary education, in order for students at these schools to be able to advance to preparatory and secondary degrees in a systematic and free manner in these areas.

The areas of northeastern Syria can accommodate about 100 to 200 private schools, which would give the choice to many residents to choose the type of education appropriate to them. Additionally, it could meet the needs of middle class and upper middle-class students of the area. The church schools are an example of this.

More Cooperation with UNICEF.

Despite the difficulties associated with the conditions for working with institutions belonging to the United Nations, more cooperation and dialogue with UNICEF is essential to increase its presence in northeastern Syria, to discover ways to support the new curricula, to monitor the educational process, and to train the educational and administrative workforce.

Expanding the New Curriculum to Include Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

If a recognized and implementable curriculum is created, the Autonomous Administration can transfer that experience to refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in order to teach the curriculum as an option, alongside the Kurdistan Region's official curriculum, instead of the official Syrian curriculum which is currently taught. This would help ease the reintegration of these refugees when they return.