

EDUCATION UNDER STRAIN IN AL-HASAKEH GOVERNORATE: DISJOINTED CURRICULA AND POLITICAL ANTAGONISM IMPACT CIVILIANS

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List of Acronyms

AANES	Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria
ACU	Assistance Coordination Unit
IDP	Internally displaced person
KNC	Kurdish National Council
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SNA	Syrian National Army
SNC	Syrian National Coalition
SYP	Syrian pound
TL	Turkish lira
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USD	United States dollar
YPG	People's Protection Units



Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the challenges and developments of education in the al-Hasakeh governorate, a region deeply affected by war, persistent economic struggles, and a security crisis. The study evaluates three educational curricula that have been enforced by the de facto authorities on the civilian population. It assesses the effects of this plurality of spheres of influence and educational programs, on the prospects of the region's inhabitants. Ultimately, the paper puts forward recommendations that could potentially alleviate these issues and mitigate their detrimental impact.

Introduction

Located in Syria's far northeast, al-Hasakeh Governorate is known for its fertile soil, abundant water, and large oil and gas reserves. This region stands out for its diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious makeup, being home to Arabs, Kurds, Syrians, Armenians, Circassians, Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis.¹ The regime government's Central Bureau of Statistics recorded its population at around 1.277 million in 2014.² In contrast, the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), affiliated with the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), reported a population of 1,322,246 with an additional 136,666 internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of November 2022.³ Precise statistics on the governorate's ethnic, racial, and religious composition are unavailable. However, it is observed that Kurds predominantly inhabit the areas along the Turkish borderline, while Arabs are primarily focused in the central and southern regions. The governorate also includes minorities like Syrians, Assyrians, Chechens, various Christian groups, and Yazidis.⁴

Al-Hasakeh, a region that was once renowned as the "breadbasket" of Syria, was responsible for the majority of the country's wheat production and half of its oil output. Despite its abundant resources, the region is currently grappling with poverty, which can be attributed to inadequate development and the Syrian regime's institutional oppression, with little support extended to local communities.⁵

The protracted war in Syria, which has escalated into an international conflict, resulted in the division of al-Hasakeh into three distinct zones of control. The Damascus regime controls the city centers of al-Hasakeh and Qamishli, along with some towns and villages south of Qamishli. The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA)⁶ controls Ras al-Ain and some villages in the Tal Tamr region. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the military wing of the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria (AANES),⁷ control the remainder of the region.⁸ The overlapping spheres of control have adversely impacted service provision, economic and social conditions, and particularly education across the governorate. The status of education continued to deteriorate due to the political, military, social, and economic challenges, as well as efforts by the forces in control to impose their educational curricula and model, each in their controlled territories.

The education system in the al-Hasakeh governorate is marked by a disjointed set of curricula, each enforced by different governing bodies: the Syrian regime, the Autonomous Administration, and the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG), in their respective territories. Compounding the issue is the lack of national and international recognition for diplomas issued outside the regime's Ministry of Education. Additionally, the economic downturn has led to a scarcity of qualified educational staff.

¹ Syria Needs Analysis Project, "the al-Hasakeh governorate Profile," ACAPS, February 2014.

² "Population Assessment Survey 2014" [in Arabic], Central Bureau of Statistics: Central Bureau of Statistics (cbsyr.sy); the report included 40 areas in al-Hasakeh and divided the governorate into safe areas (387,531 residents) and unsafe areas (889,396), http://cbsyr.sy/population_status/محافظة_الحسكة.pdf.

³ "Population Movement in North Syria" [in Arabic], Assistance Coordination Unit, <https://cutt.us/MHjy1>.

⁴ "International Report on Religious Freedoms in Syria in 2020," US Embassy Syria, <https://cutt.us/xHAP8>.

⁵ Syria Needs Analysis Project, "the al-Hasakeh governorate Profile," ACAPS, February 2014, https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/15_al_hasakeh_governorate_profile_february_2014.pdf.

⁶ The SNA is officially part of the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and affiliated with the Ministry of Defense (MoD).

⁷ The AANES is the executive and administrative arm of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC); the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) constitute its military arm.

⁸ "Control and Influence Changes After Operation Peace Spring," OMRAN for Strategic Studies, 13/12/2019, <https://omranstudies.org/index.php/publications/reports/control-and-influence-changes-after-operation-peace-spring.html>.

These factors contribute to key challenges in the education sector. The tangible impact of these challenges is seen in increasing school dropout rates and child illiteracy, presenting significant obstacles for the students' future and the region's progress.

This report provides an analysis of the various curricula adopted in the governorate, including the regime's 'official' curriculum, the AANES curriculum, the SIG curriculum, and the curricula of religious schools. It outlines the primary challenges and obstacles faced by the education sector, and offers recommendations to improve education in the governorate.

The curricula analysis covers the government curriculum for all levels, the Arabic version of the AANES curriculum, and the modified curriculum of the SIG. It relies on press reports, open sources, and studies from research centers, institutions, and civil society organizations with a focus on Syria. It also includes interviews with students, parents, teachers, and education officials from all involved parties, ensuring gender and geographical diversity. Open sources were used to verify and analyze the gathered data.

School Curricula in the al-Hasakeh governorate

Regime's Government School System

In the cities of al-Hasakeh and Qamishli, and some surrounding towns and villages under its control, the Syrian regime enforces its government-approved curriculum. The al-Hasakeh Directorate of Education indicates that about 10% of the governorate's schools are managed by the regime, while the AANES oversees the remaining 90%. Of the 2,285 school buildings in the governorate, many have been damaged, destroyed, or repurposed as SDF weapons depots and military headquarters. Government-run educational institutions are concentrated in the urban centers of al-Hasakeh and Qamishli, as well as part of the Tal Hamis region in southern Qamishli. These schools serve a total 134,891 students across 146 school buildings, with five additional facilities established to meet the rising demand for education.

To address the lack of educational infrastructure,

government schools have adopted a two-shift system. Some government buildings have been converted for educational use, and the construction of prefabricated classrooms has increased. Private institutions and language schools have been given temporary licenses to operate in the evening shift using the Ministry of Education's curriculum. Additionally, home schools serving about 6,000 students have received support.⁹

Curriculum Content and Features

The Regime government's educational curriculum, covering scientific and literary subjects from primary education to the tenth grade (First Secondary), is divided into Scientific and Literary tracks in the second and third secondary grades. This curriculum is also applied in other regime-controlled governorates and is managed by the Ministry of Education's Directorate of Curricula in Damascus, responsible for curriculum development and schoolbook production.

Both teachers and students have raised concerns about the difficulty of exams, attributing this to the curriculum's broad scope, reliance on rote memorization, and resistance to criticism. The use of outdated educational methods for years has led to academic errors being ignored by experts. Efforts to enhance the curriculum are hampered by the lack of training for teachers in modern educational techniques and the absence of educational support tools. The curriculum is still taught using traditional narrative methods,¹⁰ without incorporating contemporary global educational practices or adapting to the challenges posed by over a decade of war.¹¹ Additionally, the costs of education are not aligned with the financial realities of students and teachers.¹²

⁹ "Overcrowding and suffering... A tragedy caused by the crime of the SDF militia's seizure of most of al-Hasakeh's schools" [in Arabic], SANA, 21/9/2020, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1222750>.

¹⁰ "Spinning around in hollow boxes does not impart skills or produce graduates... University professors criticize the 'classical' education system and suggest flexible alternatives" [in Arabic], Tishreen Newspaper, 12/21/2022: <http://tishreen.news.sy/?p=829529>; "Syria... a defect in curricula and the control of old methods of education" [in Arabic], Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 3/15/2017: <https://cutt.us/qOx5s>; see also, "How do we criticize the new Syrian educational curricula? [in Arabic]" Al-Akhbar Newspaper, 3/10/2017: <https://al-akhbar.com/Opinion/238499>.

¹¹ Interview with Mais, a third-secondary student in the scientific branch from the city of Qamishli, 19/1/2023.

¹² Teacher in a regime school in Qamishli's south countryside, 27/11/2023.

Curriculum Ideology

In Syria, the Baath Party, with its nationalist ideology, oversees the educational process. In areas under regime control, the curriculum is heavily ideological, glorifying the Baath Party's principles, especially regarding the "inspirational leader" and the "axis of opposition and resistance."¹³ The Ministry of Education collaborates with Baath-affiliated groups like the Vanguard of the Baath Organization and the Revolutionary Youth Union. Additionally, key administrative roles in education, including school principals, are filled exclusively by Baathists, with appointments contingent on recommendations from a security branch.¹⁴ Despite the 2011 Revolution, the Damascus government continues to use the same approaches within the education sector.¹⁵ The Directorate of Curricula remains loyal to the official regime narrative, which frames contemporary events as a conspiracy against Syria and labels dissenters as terrorists.

The curriculum in Syria, especially in al-Hasakeh, overlooks the region's rich linguistic and cultural diversity. This stems from the 2012 Syrian constitution, which establishes Arabic as the sole official language, effectively barring education in other languages. This exclusion of other languages is apparent right from the onset of schooling, with all teaching conducted solely in Arabic. Additionally, the curriculum does not reflect the nation's ethnic and cultural diversity. For instance, the fourth-grade Arabic reading book (p. 119) refers to the Syrian Jazira as the "Syrian Arab Jazira,"¹⁶ ignoring the diverse ethnic makeup of the governorate. This approach contradicts Article 9 of the 2012 Constitution,¹⁷ which pledges to protect the cultural diversity of Syrian society and its various components.¹⁸

¹³ "Syrian education is a victim of tyranny and cross-border projects" [in Arabic], Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 30/11/2020, <https://cutt.us/aH7jp>.

¹⁴ Interviews with former and current teachers in the Qamishli countryside, January 2023.

¹⁵ "Syrian Civil War," Wikipedia entry [in Arabic], last visited on 4/2/2023, <https://cutt.us/ThmGN>.

¹⁶ The Euphrates Peninsula, also known as Al-Jazira, is a region located between the Levant, Iraq, and Anatolia. Today, the region includes northeastern Syria, northwestern Iraq, and southeastern Turkey, forming the northern part of Mesopotamia.

¹⁷ Syrian Constitution 2012, Article 33 Para. 3, the Syrian People's Assembly website, <http://www.parliament.gov.sy> [in Arabic].

¹⁸ Ibid, Article 9.

Education in SDF-Controlled Areas in al-Hasakeh

SDF Education System

In 2012, the People's Protection Units (YPG), associated with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), gained control over various cities and towns in the al-Hasakeh governorate.¹⁹ By 2014, they had established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)²⁰ and introduced their education system, titled "Education for a Democratic Society." This system includes all educational establishments in AANES-controlled areas, such as the Kurdish Language Education Institution (Education Council), academies, and institutes offering Kurdish language instruction, along with Rojava University and Cordoba University.

The North and East Syria region, comprising al-Hasakeh, al-Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor Governorates, boasts significant educational infrastructure. It hosts 4,700 schools, serving 878,000 students and employing 39,696 people.²¹ Additionally, the region features various academies, like the democratic society academies, independent women's academies, and teacher training institutes. The educational staff in this area also benefits from diverse training opportunities.²²

Curriculum Contents and Features

Under the AANES's Social Contract,²³ the three regional languages (Arabic, Kurdish, and Syriac) are the official teaching languages across all educational levels. From the third grade, students must choose a local language in addition to their main

¹⁹ "The PYD in Syria: Kurdish Papers and International Accounts" [in Arabic], Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, 10/3/2016: <https://cutt.us/UUsXs>, also: "Ascent of the PYD and the SDF," The Washington Institute, 4/7/2016: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ascent-pyd-and-sdf>.

²⁰ "The Social Contract Charter of the AANES" [in Arabic], PYD official website, <https://cutt.us/wcYBh>.

²¹ "Schools in northern and eastern Syria open their doors to students at the start of the school year" [in Arabic], Hawar News Agency, 18/7/2022, <https://cutt.us/MsYfE>.

²² "The Educational System in North and East Syria," Civil Diplomacy Center, <https://cutt.us/QylmO>.

²³ "The Social Contract Charter of the AANES" [in Arabic], PYD official website, <https://cutt.us/wcYBh>.

language of instruction, with English introduced in the fifth grade. This approach continues into secondary education, but Arabic is the primary language of instruction at AANES universities. The Curricula Institute develops educational materials by revising the regime government's curricula, supplemented with information obtained through researching electronic platforms that offer access to international curricula and experiences. ²⁴

In areas with a Kurdish majority, such as parts of Qamishli and towns like Amuda and Darbasiyah, Kurdish is the medium of school instruction. In contrast, Arabic is used in regions with a predominant Arab population, including most of al-Hasakeh City and towns like Shaddadi, Tal Hamis, Markada, and Tal Brak. Religious education is customized to students' faiths, with Islamic texts for Muslim students, Christian literature for Christian students, and a recently introduced religious education book for Yazidis. ²⁵

The curriculum in this region promotes a culture of coexistence and diversity, reflecting the region's realities. It notably emphasizes teaching an additional local language, such as Arabic, Kurdish, or Syriac. Additionally, the curriculum instills important values in children, including human rights, children's rights, women's rights, and environmental conservation.

Curriculum's Ideology

The AANES educational curriculum is deeply rooted in the propagation of its ideological principles, reflecting the democratic society and social contract concepts championed by the PYD. Local teachers report a clear politicization of the curriculum, particularly due to the Curricula Department supervisors' alleged links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an organization ideologically aligned with the PYD. These supervisors influence the curriculum content, including terminology, concepts, and maps, to align with the party's ideology. ²⁶

²⁴ Interview with former Curricula Institute member Abou Reem (did not reveal his real name), 6/1/2023.

²⁵ "Schools in northern and eastern Syria open their doors to students at the start of the school year" [in Arabic], Hawar News Agency, 18/7/2022, <https://cutt.us/MSyFE>.

²⁶ Online interview with a Geography teacher, A.J., who lives in Qamishli, on 11/11/2023.

Ideological themes are introduced early in the curriculum and become more pronounced in secondary education. For example, the tenth-grade philosophy textbook mentions Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the PKK, as a "thinker who advanced Marxist philosophy" (pages 54, 56, and 69). Ocalan's dialectical theory is further detailed in the eleventh-grade sociology textbook (page 114). Additionally, the curriculum includes a novel subject titled Women's Science/Jineology, a concept by Abdullah Ocalan focusing on women's studies, rights, and their role in the democratic society as envisaged by the PYD and PKK. This subject is taught up to the twelfth grade. ²⁷

The AANES curriculum, notably in social sciences, places a significant emphasis on practical examples relevant to North and Northeast Syria. ²⁸ However, its focus on PYD ideology and PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's concepts, such as environmental social theory and Jineology, while excluding other viewpoints, has caused discontent among the region's Arab, Kurdish, and Syriac communities. ²⁹

This curriculum shift has sparked resentment, especially in Arab-majority areas. The secondary school curriculum faces criticism for its partisan intellectual content and significant changes to history and geography textbooks. ³⁰

Moreover, AANES's coercive implementation of this curriculum has prompted negative reactions across ethnic groups, who fear ideological indoctrination of their children and suppression of diverse opinions. In Qamishli, school principals have been directed to abandon the regime Ministry of Education's curriculum in favor of AANES's, with non-compliance potentially leading to arrest. ³¹

²⁷ In 2008, The concept was adopted by PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, imprisoned by Turkey, under the title of "psychology of freedom." He used the term Jineology instead of Famina, previously used in Kurdistan literature to talk about women. The term Jineology is composed of two words, Jino, meaning woman in the Kurdish dialect used by Ocalan, and the Latin term referring to science, and means women's science. For more: <https://jinhAANESgency1.com>.

²⁸ The curriculum was reviewed with the help of a teacher in an AANES school in Qamishli City via a phone call on 6/1/2023.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "The AANES ignores Syria's mores and traditions" [in Arabic], Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 16/7/2020: <https://cutt.us/UFmnp>.

³¹ "SDF forces its curriculum on Qamishli schools" [in Arabic] Syria TV website, 5/9/2020, <https://cutt.us/Lv1sj>.

The Kurdish National Council (KNC), a member of the Syrian National Coalition of Syrian Opposition Forces, has expressed strong disapproval of the AANES's educational policies in its areas of control. In their statement, they emphasize: "The KNC, which has consistently advocated for students to pursue their education independently of ideological and partisan considerations, and has prioritized this issue, reiterates that these unjust and irresponsible decisions have resulted in increased emigration, depleted the Kurdish regions of competent and scientifically qualified personnel, deprived the Kurdish people of their right to educational freedom, directly threatened stability, and prompted further displacement and migration."³² Concurrently, the Supreme Syriac Council has denounced the PYD for pressuring the official responsible for the Syriac curriculum to conform to its educational system in Syriac schools.³³

Peace Spring Opposition-Controlled Areas in al-Hasakeh

School System in "Peace Spring" Areas

On October 9, 2019, the Turkish military, in collaboration with the SNA,³⁴ initiated "Operation Peace Spring" in northern Syria, east of the Euphrates,³⁵ targeting areas in Tal Abyad in Raqqa and Ras al-Ain in al-Hasakeh. The SNA-affiliated local council's Education and Culture Office in Ras al-Ain began its work on November 24, 2019.³⁶ The academic year, however, started on January 6, 2020, with the distribution of books and reopening

of schools,³⁷ despite a shortage of teachers.³⁸

In these areas, many primary, middle, and secondary schools follow a modified version of the Arabic-language curriculum of the Damascus government, and are affiliated with the Turkish Ministry of Education. While the SIG's Ministry of Education oversees exams, it operates under the Turkish Ministry's direct authority. The SIG's Ministry of Education has limited influence in setting policies or regulations, even for official holidays, as it adheres to the Turkish Ministry's calendar, not that of Syria.³⁹

The Ras al-Ain Directorate of Education reports that a total of 146 schools commenced the academic year 2020-2021, with 996 teachers enlisted to cater to the educational needs of 18,000 registered students.⁴⁰ However, some schools remain closed, as they require renovation and structural repairs. Additionally, numerous schools have been converted into military facilities by the Turkish military and Syrian opposition factions.⁴¹ Intisar Doudou, the Director of the Education Office in Ras al-Ain's Local Council, stated that of the total schools, 177 are operational, but 82 are in dire need of renovation.⁴²

Curriculum Content and Features

In the region, a unique curriculum developed by the SIG's Education Directorate, supervised by the Turkish Directorate of Education, is implemented.⁴³ Ms. Doudou, the Education Office Director of the Ras al-Ain Local Council, notes that this curriculum is contemporary, accommodating various age groups, aligning with modern assessment methods, and subject to regular updates and

³² "The KNC calls on the Autonomous Administration to cancel its decision to 'close private institutes and schools'" [in Arabic], Rudaw, 9/19/2022: <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/kurdistan/190920228>.

³³ "The International Syriac Council: The Kurdish administration is responsible for the attack on researcher Issa Rashid Issa in Qamishli" [in Arabic], Al-Khabar TV, 9/26/2018: <https://cutt.us/IDgyB>.

³⁴ "The Syrian National Army: Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for Its Relationship with Damascus," Geneva Center for Security Policy, October 2020: <https://cutt.us/23DX7>.

³⁵ "Operation Peace Spring Three Years On" [in Arabic], Al-Araby Al-Jadid, <https://cutt.us/IqNYS3>.

³⁶ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/Ulh8T>.

³⁷ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/PbNgq>.

³⁸ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/yjtUR>.

³⁹ "A complex situation faces education in north and northeast Syria," Noon Post, 2/11/2019, <https://www.noonpost.com/content/34929>.

⁴⁰ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/Ugdbm>.

⁴¹ Phone interview with a resident of Ras al-Ain on 14/1/2023.

⁴² Phone interview on 25/1/2023.

⁴³ Interview with a member of the Curriculum Committee that reviewed the curricula adopted in the opposition areas last year as part of a cooperation program between Turkey and the EU conducted on 15/1/2023.

revisions.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that the curriculum places significant emphasis on teaching Islamic education in three areas: the Holy Qur'an, the Prophet's Sunnah, and Islamic education.⁴⁵

Curriculum Ideology

According to multiple testimonies, the Turkish coordinators exert significant influence over the local council offices in Ras al-Ain, including the Directorate of Education. They reportedly intervene in the educational process by appointing teachers and deciding the class allocations for each subject.⁴⁶ The expansion of Islamic Education subjects is described by the Director of the Education Office in Ras Al-Ain as an effort to "build a scientifically successful and morally committed generation." She explains that the curriculum is designed to nurture well-rounded development in children, enabling students to "become doctors who possess a deep understanding of their religious teachings, or engineers who are knowledgeable about their faith."⁴⁷

The involvement of foreign organizations in the education sector is a pressing concern. The Islamic relief organization IHH founded two Qur'anic schools in the area,⁴⁸ while the Turkish Red Crescent,⁴⁹ Ansar Charitable Organization,⁵⁰ and the Pakistani House of Peace Association have provided support for the establishment of Qur'anic schools.⁵¹ Additionally, entities such as the Tribes and Clans Council have been seen to interfere

⁴⁴ Online interview on 25/11/2023.

⁴⁵ Interview with Um Ahmed, mother of a first-grade and an eighth-grade student and a former teacher from Ras al-Ain, interview conducted on 12/11/2023.

⁴⁶ Interview with a former Ras al-Ain Local Council member, who refused to disclose his identity, conducted on 20/11/2023.

⁴⁷ Interview with a member of the Curriculum Committee that reviewed the curricula adopted in the opposition areas last year as part of a cooperation program between Turkey and the EU conducted on 15/11/2023.

⁴⁸ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/4cNU2>; "In the presence of the governor of Urfa, the iHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation inaugurates two institutes for teaching the Qur'an and graduates 132 teachers in Ras al-Ain," Khabour Network, 23/6/2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWRiPFRIRqC>.

⁴⁹ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/SsRqk>.

⁵⁰ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/D11Pj>.

⁵¹ Ras al-Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], 2/10/2020, <https://cutt.us/4NK7Z>.

in this sector as well. In contrast to this focus on Islamic education, the Kurdish language is notably absent from the curriculum, despite the significant Kurdish population in the city, which, before 2019, comprised nearly half of Ras Al-Ain's residents.

Private and Religious Education

Private and religious schools have become a temporary solution for parents seeking education for their children in the al-Hasakeh governorate. Overseen by Churches and Sharia'a institutes, these schools offer a pathway to legal recognition of qualifications from the regime's government and potential international recognition. Religious schools in AANES-controlled areas that are recognized by the regime include Al-Amal Schools, which are affiliated with the Syriac Church in Qamishli, and various other church schools that cater to both Muslim and Christian students, which suffer from severe overcrowding. However, the repeated threats by the SDF to close these schools and bar Muslim, particularly Kurdish, student enrollment have sparked numerous strikes and protests.⁵² Furthermore, the increasing fees of these schools add to people's burden in the midst of a deepening economic crisis.

From 2021 to 2023, there was an increase in religiously-oriented educational initiatives in Ras al-Ain. Some of these initiatives, often resembling Turkey's Imam Hatip schools,⁵³ were overseen and supported by SNA factions or the Turkish government, and they are accredited in Turkey.⁵⁴ Also prevalent were "mosques' education

⁵² "Education under the AANES" OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, 15/11/2016, <https://cutt.us/vGNFd>.

⁵³ Imam Hatip High School (Turkish: Imam hatip lisesi) and its abbreviation "IHL" is an official institution for secondary and preparatory education in Turkey that aims to raise and provide imams and preachers. Imam Hatip schools operate under the "General Administration for Religious Education" of the "Ministry of National Education » In Turkey, Imam Hatip schools are officially considered "vocational schools," "Anadolu" Imam Hatip schools are schools that provide, in addition to Islamic religious curricula, intensive teaching of foreign languages (often English or Russian) and scientific subjects such as physics, chemistry, and mathematics. See Encyclopedia of Islam: <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/imam-hatip-lisesi>. See also the General Directorate of Religious Education website: <https://dogm.meb.gov.tr/>.

⁵⁴ Ras Al Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/WJDaY>.

curricula⁵⁵ and religious seminars akin to the Katatib system.⁵⁶ These seminars, not governed by any regulatory law, are established through personal initiatives or sponsored by certain organizations.⁵⁷

Difficulties and Challenges

The multiplicity of approved curricula in the al-Hasakeh governorate has resulted in a host of issues that pose challenges to parents, students, as well as the de facto authorities in the region. The most prominent of which are:

a. Formal Recognition of Curricula

The issue of formal recognition of various curricula in the al-Hasakeh governorate is a significant concern. Although the current curricula do not differ greatly from those used before 2011, there is growing unease among students and parents about the exclusive recognition of the regime government's curriculum by official and international entities. A survey by the Assistance Coordination Unit in al-Hasakeh showed that 43% in Ras al-Ain prefer the regime curriculum, with this figure increasing to 58% in AANES-controlled areas.⁵⁸ Notably, the SIG's curriculum in Ras al-Ain is only recognized by Turkey, and accreditation of the certificates remains subject to certain conditions. Students are required to pass a preparatory test, known as the YOS exam, for admission to Turkish universities.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the lack of response from Turkish education coordinators has led to many students being denied university enrollment in Turkey.

In contrast, the AANES curriculum lacks both domestic and international recognition. The

strained relations between AANES and the regime, especially with the latter pressuring UNESCO against collaboration with AANES, add to this issue. Parents are worried about the regime labeling individuals associated with these schools as terrorists, which could harm their children's future education and opportunities.⁶⁰ This concern is heightened by the non-recognition of the Kurdish language adopted in the curriculum.

Many AANES officials have chosen to enroll their children in schools within regime-controlled areas, or have them sit for exams there, leading to dissatisfaction among civilians whose children attend AANES-operated schools.⁶¹ Despite AANES's promise to hold these officials accountable, no concrete measures have been taken to address the issue.⁶² AANES continues to enforce its curriculum despite widespread rejection from various ethnic groups in the region,⁶³ leading to multiple protests against its education policies.⁶⁴ Efforts to get comments from officials in SDF-controlled areas were unsuccessful due to fears of reprisal from security or partisan forces.

b. Teaching Process Efficiency

Academics: Syria's education system is grappling with a significant shortage of teachers, leading to scientific inadequacies in the educational process. Muhammad, a principal of an AANES-run school, highlights the dearth of qualified instructors in key science subjects, adversely affecting the overall quality of education.⁶⁵ Ms. Samia, a Kurdish language teacher, points out the difficulties

⁵⁵ Ras Al Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], 14/8/2022, <https://cutt.us/gUgGa>.

⁵⁶ Katateeb, plural of Kuttab, is the basic school in Islamic education. The kuttab was originally attached to a mosque and taught children basic reading and writing skills, in addition to religious teachings.

⁵⁷ Ras Al Ain Local Council Facebook page [Arabic], <https://cutt.us/BOW5E>.

⁵⁸ "Schools in Syria: Edition 7," ACU, August 2022, https://acu-sy.org/imu_reports/schools-in-syria-07-thematic-2022/.

⁵⁹ Phone interview with a local council member who preferred to remain anonymous, 16/1/2022.

⁶⁰ "Khalil discusses with Maurer the situation of humanitarian and relief work in the al-Hasakeh governorate" [in Arabic], SANA, 11/5/2022, <http://sana.sy/?p=1645922>.

⁶¹ Interview with a former curriculum committee member. The insight was shared also by many students' parents.

⁶² "Autonomous Administration threatens its employees who send their children to government schools with 'accountability and punishment'" [in Arabic], Rudaw, 3/11/2018, <https://cutt.us/E2XWY>.

⁶³ "Autonomous Administration closes dozens of schools and institutes in Qamishli" [in Arabic], Enab Baladi, 18/7/2022, <https://cutt.us/jkPuu>.

⁶⁴ "Demonstrations against the Kurdish curriculum in Al-Hasakeh, Syria" [in Arabic], Al-Quds al-Arabi, 25/8/2017, <https://cutt.us/FNOdo>.

⁶⁵ Interview with Muhammad (pseudonym), an AANES-affiliated school principal, 26/1/2023.

students face in grasping the translation of scientific terminology.⁶⁶ A member of the Curriculum Amendment Committee further emphasizes the challenges, noting, “There is a lack of qualified teachers, no scientific scrutiny of the information contained in the curriculum, as well as inadequacy of teaching methods, tools, and laboratory equipment.” In most schools, scientific laboratories and educational materials are scarce, with over 95% lacking proper facilities. These schools are also devoid of libraries for reading or borrowing books and effective computer labs. Additionally, the majority of schools in the area do not offer kindergarten, with only about 25% supporting this early education stage.⁶⁷

Teaching Staff: Before the Syrian conflict began in 2011, Syria’s education sector already faced a teacher shortage, relying heavily on temporary contractors known as “deputized teachers.” The conflict has worsened this situation, leading to the hiring of high school graduates who have not completed their university education on a short-term basis. In Ras al-Ain, 455 teachers have secondary-level qualifications, 129 are enrolled in undergraduate programs, and only 72 hold a university degree. In both AANES and Syrian regime-controlled areas, the figures are 708 teachers with secondary diplomas, 740 undergraduates, and 607 with university degrees.⁶⁸

A considerable proportion of teachers lack necessary scientific specialization and knowledge of pedagogical methods. Additionally, there is a deficiency in training for school principals, particularly in school administration. In Ras al-Ain, an alarming 89% of principals have not received administrative training, while in AANES areas, the figure stands at 59%.⁶⁹ This lack of oversight and accountability in administrative processes

has led to appointments that do not meet the required qualifications. In rural areas, it’s common for school principals to lack a university degree, which points to systemic issues in the educational infrastructure.⁷⁰

The education sector in Ras al-Ain faces a critical challenge due to a lack of specialized personnel. Despite the establishment of the Teachers Training Institute by the Directorate of Education, it suffers from a shortage of qualified staff, mirroring the broader issues in the region’s schools. Reports indicate that even the director of this institute does not hold a university degree.⁷¹ Additionally, a considerable number of teachers lack the necessary certifications, and some have resorted to falsifying their credentials. The situation is compounded by widespread nepotism in staffing decisions.⁷² Complicating matters, the administrative structure in Ras al-Ain is inadequate. A notable 29% of the teaching staff in the region are not specialists in their fields, further undermining the quality of the education provided.⁷³

In AANES-controlled areas, teachers face the risk of detention and forced conscription into military service. This has sparked protests, leading to the subsequent detention of many students.⁷⁴

c. Security Situation

The limitation to only recognizing the regime’s curriculum has led to a surge of students enrolling in schools within regime-controlled regions. This requirement forces many students to travel long distances to attend classes, placing significant psychological and moral stress on their parents,⁷⁵ who worry about the security risks associated with passing through

⁶⁶ Interview with Samia (pseudonym), a Kurdish language teacher in an AANES-affiliated school, 26/1/2023.

⁶⁷ “Schools in Syria: Edition 7,” ACU, August 2022, https://acu-sy.org/imu_reports/schools-in-syria-07-thematic-2022/.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Interview with a teacher in Tal Hamis on 17/12/2022.

⁷¹ Interview with a local council member who preferred to remain anonymous, 16/1/2022.

⁷² Interview with Abdallah, a teacher, 18/1/2023.

⁷³ “Schools in Syria: Edition 7,” ACU, August 2022, https://acu-sy.org/imu_reports/schools-in-syria-07-thematic-2022/.

⁷⁴ “PKK’s role in the PYD educational system in Syria,” Haramoun Center for Contemporary Studies, 5/6/2021, <https://cutt.us/4zDIM>.

⁷⁵ Interview with Abi Obada, parent of a fifth-grade student living in Amouda, on 15/1/2023.

multiple checkpoints and military zones on a daily basis. In Ras al-Ain and its surrounding areas, the volatile security situation and frequent clashes between armed factions often force school closures due to concerns over student safety.

The security environment also poses risks for educators. The regime has enacted policies to dismiss teachers who have not fulfilled military service obligations. The 'Syrians for Justice' organization reports that over 65 teachers were removed from government-affiliated schools in the first half of 2018 alone.⁷⁶

Additionally, the AANES curriculum's educational staff face several challenges, including low efficiency, a shortage of specialists, and a lack of experienced teachers. Many specialists are reluctant to teach in AANES-run schools, fearing security prosecution by the regime, especially if they live in regime-controlled areas. They also face difficulties in traveling to other governorates or passing through regime checkpoints.

d. Economic Situation

School students in Syria face numerous challenges, exacerbated by economic hardships and limited family resources for education. The Covid-19 pandemic has further worsened living conditions, pushing many families to send their children to work, thereby increasing child labor rates during school closures.⁷⁷

The lack of adequate teaching staff and scarcity of public schools add to the financial burden on students' families. They often have to bear high transportation costs and expenses for private tutoring.⁷⁸ In the locality of Ras al-Ain, some families have had to halt

their children's education, while others have resorted to employing their children to meet daily household needs amid the economic crisis.⁷⁹

For teachers, remuneration is a significant challenge. As of January 2023, teachers in government-run schools earn between 160,000 to 190,000 SYP (about 24 USD), while those in AANES schools receive 400,000 to 450,000 SYP (around 60 USD), according to teachers' testimonies collated in January 2023.⁸⁰ In contrast, teachers in schools affiliated with the Interim Government in Ras al-Ain city are paid approximately 1,900 TL (about 100 USD). These salaries are generally insufficient and do not meet daily living expenses, with 97% of teachers struggling to secure their basic needs.⁸¹

Results

The challenging state of education and declining living standards in Syria have led to a significant increase in school dropouts. In the al-Hasakeh governorate, the dropout rate for children aged 6 to 18 years is 56%, and in the Ras al-Ain region, it stands at 42%.⁸²

The primary reason for this is the lack of financial resources within families, compelling many children into labor. Deteriorating living conditions have forced households to depend on their children for income over education.⁸³ Additionally, some parents, due to a lack of awareness, neglect their children's education. In eastern Syria, parents' resistance to the imposed curricula results in further dropouts.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ "Al-Hasakeh: Arbitrary Dismissal of at Least 80 Teachers after Years of Service," *Syrians for Truth and Justice*, 18/12/2018, <https://stj-sy.org/en/1094/>.

⁷⁷ "Child labor is on the rise in Hasakeh amid deteriorating economic conditions" [in Arabic], *North Press Agency*, 28/6/2021, last visited on 6/7/2023, <https://npasyria.com/71910/>.

⁷⁸ Interviews with parents in Qamishli's countryside were held between 20/12/2022 and 15/1/2023.

⁷⁹ Interviews with Um Ahmad, Abdallah, the teacher, a civilian family in Ras al-Ain, and a local council member.

⁸⁰ Interviews with teachers in governorate schools, held in January 2023.

⁸¹ "Schools in Syria: Edition 7," *op. cit.*

⁸² *Schools in Syria*, 7th edition, *op. cit.*, p 110.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p 79.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

There is also a disturbing trend of minors being recruited into armed factions and young girls being kidnapped for this purpose. The curricula in these settings often promote partisan views and encourage joining armed groups, leading many adolescents to leave school for such organizations. Despite efforts to combat this, some militias continue recruiting children. The Revolutionary Youth Organization, linked to the PYD, actively recruits teenagers in SDF areas. Similarly, in regime-controlled areas, a high number of teenagers leave school to join the paramilitary group National Defense Forces, or Iranian militias.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, there is a lack of accurate information regarding the situation in Ras al-Ain.

Rural areas are increasingly witnessing a ban on girls' education, leading to a drop in their average age of marriage.⁸⁶ A teacher in southern al-Hasakeh reports cases of girls being married as young as 14, a significant decrease from the previous average marriage age of around 20.

Educators and public advocates express concern that the confusion caused by multiple, politicized curricula and their ideological basis could affect children's future identities. They fear that these factors might deepen divisions, extending them from a military context to social and civil spheres, further fragmenting Syrian society. This fragmentation threatens the social cohesion of a region that depends on the interdependence of its ethnically and nationally diverse population.

Recommendations

The state of education in the al-Hasakeh governorate is extremely delicate, and poses a potential crisis for the upcoming generation. The region is affected by high school dropout rates, widespread illiteracy, an increasing trend of child labor, and the prevalence of early marriage. The situation is further complicated by the politicization of education based on territorial control, contributing to a growing social rift and a rise in hate speech.

⁸⁵ Interview with a clan notable in the countryside of Qamishli conducted on 11/1/2023.

⁸⁶ "Child-marriage in al-Hasakeh's countryside, while families are keeping silent" [in Arabic], North Press, <https://npsyria.com/80280/>.

In light of these challenges, this report offers the following suggestions and recommendations to all relevant stakeholders.

- a. **Educational initiatives must support efforts to standardize educational curricula and establish benchmarks that respect human rights and the diverse cultures of the region.** The lack of a unified curriculum worsens societal divides. Therefore, it is crucial to pressure local authorities to revise educational content in various areas to align with scientific standards, with help from organizations like UNICEF and UNESCO. This revision should maintain an inclusive national identity and recover what was lost during years of conflict and ideological curriculum proliferation. Additionally, legal recognition of educational curricula and certificates, past and future, is vital. Currently, the non-recognition of curricula other than the Damascus government's leaves many without legal acknowledgment of their education.
- b. **In early recovery and reconstruction efforts, it is essential to prioritize the rehabilitation of schools and educational facilities in the region.** The lack of specialized educational facilities meeting international standards in construction and equipment presents economic challenges for both the regional administration and student families. This deficiency also negatively affects the educational process and students' psychological well-being. Thus, international organizations and donors should work with local entities to launch projects for constructing, restoring, and equipping educational infrastructure, enhancing education in the governorate.
- c. **Aid programs should focus on Syria's educational sector, providing logistical and programmatic support.** The scarcity of specialized educational personnel and the absence of universally approved curricula across Syrian regions lead to a knowledge gap in the next generation and hinder their ability to keep up with scientific progress. Furthermore, the lack of economic security for educational staff drives them to either leave the region or quit teaching, which only meets

minimal living standards. Therefore, assistance programs must prioritize enhancing teachers' qualifications to improve their income and facilitate the educational process. This can be achieved through partnerships between local authorities and international organizations, or by allocating support programs for education staff. Additionally, empowering the education sector in the province through various international organizations active in the region is crucial.

d. Emergency and development aid programs must focus on reducing the economic pressures that lead to school dropouts.

Addressing the lack of resources in student families is essential, with solutions tailored to individual circumstances. In Syria's northern and eastern regions, aid program designs should acknowledge their potential indirect benefits in tackling these challenges. Integrating family educational needs into the criteria for cash assistance or cash-for-work programs can help lessen the reliance on child labor. Additionally, public awareness campaigns about the dangers of child labor, illiteracy, and adolescents engaging in risky activities like military involvement, drug trafficking, or smuggling are crucial. These campaigns should highlight education as a safer and more promising alternative for children's futures, encouraging families to prioritize their children's education.

e. Stakeholders in northeast Syria are advised to treat education as a key factor in societal cohesion, independent of political ideology.

The Europeans and Americans need, within the frameworks of cooperation they have established with the Syrian Democratic Council on the one hand, and the political relations that bind them with Turkey (which in turn exerts constant pressure on the Syrian Interim Government) on the other hand, to put an end to the interference of foreign groups from all parties in the educational process. Additionally, Russia should be encouraged to persuade the Damascus regime to recognize the ethnic and cultural diversity of the region. This can start with abandoning policies that ignore minority rights and exclude

cultural rights from educational curricula. The imposition of specific ideas and political ideologies in education by ruling forces leads to societal backlash, especially in regions with contrasting ideologies, as shown by parents boycotting education. Moreover, achieving a political resolution in Syria is unlikely as long as divisive ideologies are instilled in the youth, who are the generation tasked with learning the national recovery process.

f. The de facto authorities across northeast Syria must adhere to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in line with the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This agenda underscores the commitment to providing equitable, high-quality, and inclusive education at all levels. The de facto authorities in the region are responsible for ensuring that curricula include principles of human rights, women's rights, and the rights of religious, linguistic, and ethnic minorities, while fostering a unified Syrian identity. Additionally, any schools repurposed as military bases, detention centers, or security facilities must be restored to their educational function. It is also crucial that the economic resources within the governorate are effectively used to support these initiatives.

g. International actors should pressure the Syrian regime to engage in United Nations-led negotiations aiming at establishing criteria for amending educational curricula, ensuring balanced legal recognition for all inhabitants, and accommodating curriculum changes reflecting the region's diverse components.

Moreover, international actors should pressure the de facto authorities to end the involvement of foreign groups in the educational system. Specifically, in SDF-controlled areas, the influence of foreign members of the PKK in education should cease, along with the recruitment and abduction of students. In regions under the SNA's control in Ras al-Ain, Turkish organizations and supervisors should discontinue their management of education. In areas governed by the Syrian regime, military headquarters must be removed from schools,

and militia interference in education should be stopped. Additionally, teachers opposing these policies should not face prosecution. This comprehensive approach aims to promote a more inclusive, just, and equitable educational environment across Syria.

