

Education in Internal Displacement Camps (Northeastern Syria)



ASO Center for Consultancy and Strategic Studies

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Introduction:

In the last years of the war in Syria, the education sector across the entire Syrian geography has experienced significant deterioration and decline, following the military battles that took place in the cities and the continuous change of areas of control between the various military parties in Syria, which imposed their alternative educational curricula to the educational curricula of the Ministry of the Syrian regime. In addition to violent battles and heavy shelling of schools and educational centers in conflict areas and the transformation of schools in areas of stability into shelters for the displaced from their areas.

According to UNICEF estimates¹, the number of Syrian children who are not enrolled in school in Syria and neighboring countries is about 2.8 million. These children lost their schools and educational centers, lost access to education as a result of the war and the destruction of educational infrastructure and were displaced from their areas to displacement areas, much of which were displacement camps within Syria, that lack the minimum fundamentals and capabilities that can provide education and learning.

At the same time, after the beginning of Turkish attacks aimed at ethnic cleansing and demographic change in Syria's Kurdish cities, tens of thousands of children and their families were displaced and moved to displacement camps that lack the minimum basics of a decent life in the areas under the control of the Self-Administration.

The Turkish attack and the pro-Ankara factions on the cities of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain and Gire Spi/Tel Abyad led to the displacement of nearly 300,000 civilians², towards the areas controlled by the SDF. The IDPs were distributed in temporary shelters in schools and government buildings to be later distributed to camps prepared specifically for them, with the aim of emptying the temporary shelters. Hence, the "Washokani" camp was established in November 2019 near the town of Twaina in Al-Hasakah countryside and then "Serekaniye" camp was established in August 2020, in preparation for the new academic year, according to statements made by the Self-Administration.³

The displacement process and the inability for civilians to return to their villages and cities due to the serious violations committed by the Syrian opposition militants against them⁴, led to the disruption of the educational process. Around 23,000

¹ In Idlib, schools reopen amid uncertainty and fear <https://cutt.us/Y4nkl>

² Syria: Kurds Call for Opening a "Humanitarian Corridor" to Evacuate Civilians Trapped in Ras al-Ain, France 24, October 17, 2019 <https://cutt.us/DJFWH>

³ Inauguration of a New Camp for the IDPs of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain, East of Al-Hasakah, Ezdina website, August 16, 2020 <https://www.ezdina.com/2020/08/News-public461.html>

⁴ Syria: Bachelet Warns from Further Violations and Abuses in the Areas Controlled by the Pro-Turkish Militant Factions, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 18 September 2020 <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26258&LangID=A>

students, registered with the Education Authority of the Self-Administration in Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad before the occupation, dropped out of school⁵. Despite the Self-Administration's attempts to return students to schools, a small number were able to enroll in schools primitively opened, due to the lack of support of available resources and the failure of relevant humanitarian organizations to adopt projects related to the educational sector in both camps.⁶

Education amidst Shotguns from the Beginning

On October 9, 2019, the Turkish Army and Syrian Islamic factions launched an aerial and ground attack against the cities of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain in Al-Hasakah governorate and Tal Abyad in Raqqqa governorate, with the aim of occupying them and expelling their indigenous people, as part of the process of demographic change and ethnic cleansing adopted by Turkey in the Kurdish region in Syria.

During the operation and on 17 October of that year, the Self-Administration in Northeastern Syria issued a statement to public opinion, in which it indicated the number of schools targeted by the Turkish Army and its loyal Syrian Islamic factions in Al-Jazeera region (which includes the entire governorate of Al-Hasakah) and the Euphrates region (which includes the areas of Kobani, Ain Issa and Tal Abyad). It has reached 810 schools, all of which, according to the Self-Administration, are completely out of service and 5,224 teachers in the educational corps stopped working.

According to the Self-Administration, 150 schools have completely become out of service, including 20 schools that were completely destroyed due to the Turkish bombing. The number of students deprived of education reached 17,526 students and 1409 teachers stopped working in the city of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain alone. In the city of Tal Tamr and its countryside, 120 schools stopped working, 7,833 students were deprived of education, and 849 teachers stopped working. While the number of schools that stopped receiving students in the town of Darbasiyah reached 114 schools, and 983 teachers stopped working. The number of schools that stopped in the city of Tal Abyad and its countryside reached 426 and 51,200 students were deprived of education.

Turkish invasion caused damage to the remaining schools in Northeastern Syria in the areas still under the Self-Administration control. The Self-Administration was forced to turn 109 schools belonging to the Education Authority into shelters for the displaced from the cities of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain in Al-Hasakah governorate and Tal Abyad in Raqqqa governorate.

⁵ Via WhatsApp, Mohamad Hajo, Spokesperson of the Education Authority in Serekaniye Camp, 4 July 2021

⁶ Via WhatsApp, Journalist Orhan Kemal, 3 July 2021

Shift education... Two hours a day for children's education in batches!

One in eight children in every classroom requires specialized psychosocial support to achieve effective learning, according to a UNICEF report. The organization's report, published in August 2019, indicates that about 40% of the school infrastructure in Syria was damaged or destroyed during the war in Syria. The report indicated that 2 million Syrian children, or about a third of Syrian children, are out of school and about 1.3 million are at risk of dropping out. The same report also indicated that the UN verified 385 attacks on educational facilities since 2014.⁷

Mohamad Hajo, the spokesperson for the Schools Authority in the Serekaniye camp, explains the extent of the damage caused to the education sector in the wake of the Turkish attack and the occupation of the city. He lists their statistics and numbers, saying, "The actual number of schools in Serekaniye was 160, but as a result of the attack of Jabhat al-Nusra and its loyal factions in 2012-2013, many of them were destroyed. Thus, the number of schools before the Turkish occupation was 143. Nevertheless, we were managing them and receiving students from different social strata, Kurds and Arabs. The total number of students was 23,130 students for the primary and preparatory levels, while we were unable to receive secondary school students at that time."

Hajo adds, "Today, due to the displacement that resulted from the Turkish invasion, the number has been reduced to two schools, one in each camp, and the number of students registered there is only about 3,500 students. Therefore, we suffer greatly in managing this file. This year, at the Serekaniye camp, the students lacked the slightest educational need for stationery, books and notebooks. The Self-Administration lacks the financial capability to support these students."

He stresses that "The biggest barrier we face is the number of rooms reserved for classrooms because the total number of students is 3500-4000. We only have one school in Serekaniye camp consisting of only 13 rooms. While in Washokani camp there are two schools, each with only 8 rooms."

Mohammad Hajo confirms that due to the difficult conditions in the camps, the students' hours of education have decreased, explaining that, "Children receive only two hours of teaching in the school in order to give the opportunity for other students and to ensure that all students receive the minimum possible teaching hours. Meaning that students receive two hours of education instead of six hours, not to mention our urgent need as teaching staff for educational supplies and the urgent need for students to have the tools necessary for the progress of the educational process."

⁷ Syria Crisis Fast Facts, UNICEF's Official Website, August 2019

Noura Osu, an administrator at Serekaniye camp school, says, "Students who have lost their homes and schools experience deep and constant nostalgia for their old homes and classrooms. They now only remember images of war and displacement. This is a complex obstacle because it is not easy to get students out of the psychological shell represented by the two images of war and displacement. As a result, they are not prepared to receive an education under the harsh conditions of the camps and the classroom lesson often turns into a rotation of telling children's stories and narratives about the war."⁸

CSOs' Timid Attempts

After people of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad were displaced by the Turkish occupation forces and the Syrian National Army's Islamic factions loyal to them, dozens of local civic organizations working in the areas under the control of the Self-Administration rushed to provide urgent services and support to them, by providing food aid and shelter centers in coordination with the Self-Administration, which later relocated the displaced in camps under its management. Thus, the organizations work within them through a set of programs and projects that are funded by international donors.

Local civic organizations rely mainly on funds and grants provided by western governmental programs or international organizations concerned with various affairs in Northeastern Syria. However, these funding programs provided are often incompatible with the basic needs of the population, including the needs of refugees. International organizations provide funding based on strategic plans that they set, through which they determine the type of projects and programs they provide and support in Northeastern Syria. The support for the educational sector, especially those related to the Self-Administration curricula in Northeastern Syria, isn't among the priorities of these donors.

GAV4RD organization has tried to provide support to the displaced of the cities of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad, since the beginning of the Turkish invasion of both cities, however, the donors' plans and circumstances did not allow them to implement educational projects or to provide the necessary support to the schools in the IDPs' camps, as explained by Nishtiman Khalaf, the CEO of the organization.

Despite this, Nishtiman Khalaf stresses the urge to start the implementation of some projects. She says, "Despite the lack of support, we implemented some projects in which we targeted children of small age groups, through educational recreational activities, yet they were not purely educational. We also worked to support hearing and speech impaired children. Hence, we faced technical problems in terms of the

⁸ Via WhatsApp, Noura Osu, Administrator at Serekaniye Camp School, July 5, 2021

lack of a scientific alphabet for deaf and mute people in the Kurdish language, which is the language of the majority of the displaced."

The CEO of GAV4RD adds, "The Self-Administration was not cooperating as necessary before now, however recently there has been more flexibility from the Self-Administration and we were able to reach understandings for cooperation in the field of education support, especially for the displaced and afflicted areas."

Daoud, the CEO of the Peace and Civil Society Center said, "We offer two programs for children in Washokani camp (education by opening a kindergarten for children aged 3 to 5 + a protection program by opening a child-friendly space for ages 6 to 17)."

He continues, "Children receive education, purposeful entertainment programs and special programs for children's parents, in order to train them on methods of educating their children at home. Also, how to deal with children during all stages of development. We have programs for how to take care of the fetus, through programs specifically for mothers. And other programs directed to parents to promote the culture of such a forum to support interaction between children from the age of 6 to 17. This is achieved by providing efficient entertainment programs, vocational education and literacy programs. We have a plan to broadcast educational programs through the radio during the school closure period due to the complete lockdown."

No support for the education sector in the camps:

Since 2015, the AANES began⁹ imposing a new multilingual education system and partially dropped the curriculum of the Ministry of Education of the Syrian regime government. The curriculum was taught in in the cantons of the Self-Administration, at that time, that is in Al-Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin.

The AANES implemented its educational curriculum by issuing curricula for the first, second and third grades in Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac Assyrian languages. In 2016, the curriculum became from the first to the sixth grade. Starting in 2017, the Self-Administration imposed its educational curriculum until the tenth grade of secondary school, before completing the curriculum until the 12th grade since 2019.¹⁰

The Education Authority in the ANNES supports the educational curricula that it issued and applies them in its areas of control in the governorates of Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, the countryside of Deir Ezzor and Kobani. It does not receive any international support, not even from international organizations in its educational plans. This is due to the absence of international recognition of the curricula developed by the Self-Administration. The administration's curricula are accused of being ideological and

⁹ Autonomous Administration Closes Schools Run by Christians (Armenian & Syriac) in NES – August, 2018 <https://stj-sy.org/ar/732/>

¹⁰ Ibid.



constitute an extension of the puritanical political discourse of the party that dominates the administration.

On the other hand, some local and international organizations have rehabilitated the infrastructure in a number of cities and towns in Al-Hasakah and Raqqa governorates, which were subjected to total and partial destruction during the war years, without interfering with the quality of the curricula taught in those schools and the parties controlling them.

The Education Authority of the Self-Administration teaches its curricula to the IDPs of the occupied Kurdish cities, yet this process is marred by many shortcomings; among them are the poor funding allocated to the camps for the displaced, and the Self-Administration's lack of the financial resources necessary to build advanced educational establishments that are appropriate to the teaching process and the inability of local organizations to provide the required support to supplement the educational process with the necessary supplies in the camps.

Noura Osu, an administrator and teacher at the Serekaniye camp school, says that it is the Self-Administration that provides support to the educational centers in the camp, "despite the lack of aid," as she described it. She points out that international organizations do not provide any support to the educational sector.

Mohammed Hajo, the spokesperson for the Education Authority in Serekaniye camp explains, "So far, there is no actual and sufficient support for the Education Authority to support the children in the Serekaniye and Washokani camps. HELP KURDISTAN organization has built six classrooms in the two camps and also provided clothing for students, which is all that has been done so far."

While the journalist, Orhan Kemal, who is from the city of Serekaniye/Ras al-Ain, points out that international organizations do not provide support and do not focus on the educational sector in the camps for the displaced and stresses, as well, the lack of cooperation of the Self-Administration institutions in this regard.

In the same context, the CEO of GAV Nishtiman Khalaf confirms that "donor organizations are not serious about supporting the educational sector in the camps and most of the time, we rely on a formula of joint cooperation between us and the civilians." She gives an example, "In one village, students were forced to go to the schools of the neighboring villages due to the lack of a school in their village, we therefore, took the initiative of building a school in collaboration with the people by providing construction materials and the people of the village ensured the construction of the rooms. We are waiting for the Education Authority to provide furniture and teaching staff to open the school. I give this example as evidence that there is no actual support for the education sector projects in the region."

She stresses that "Projects are being prepared, aiming to support the educational sector in the camps, as well as support the displaced outside the camps so that

children can return to school. However, it must be mentioned that our work is not limited to supporting schools only, but we also work to support the families of displaced children, especially women, by developing their capabilities and qualifying them professionally to be able to rely on themselves to secure living expenses. We believe that this will contribute to creating a suitable environment for children to return to schools in the camps."

While Daoud, the CEO of the Peace and Civil Society Center, confirms that the progress of the educational process in the camps is slow and was affected by the Corona pandemic, which caused the closure of schools several times. Also due to lack of funding, as funding was reduced for all organizations in Northeastern Syria in 2021, that added significant hardship to an already complex situation.

Conclusion:

The deterioration of the educational process in Northeastern Syria is one of the unforeseen consequences of the Turkish occupation and the Syrian jihadist factions of the Kurdish cities in Afrin, Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad. Because of the frailty of the infrastructure and the destruction of the remainder due to the raging war for more than a decade, people have been displaced from occupied cities to other semi-disaster and destroyed cities. Turkey cut off drinking water for people in the areas under the control of the Self-Administration. It also seized the waters of the Euphrates River, which stopped the flow of necessary water for turbines that generate electricity in the Euphrates Dam. Power was cut in all cities that were partially supplied by this source. Then 300,000 people were displaced from those cities. There were no camps to receive them, so they went to the schools, which were turned into shelters. This has disrupted the education process for the rest of the non-displaced students.

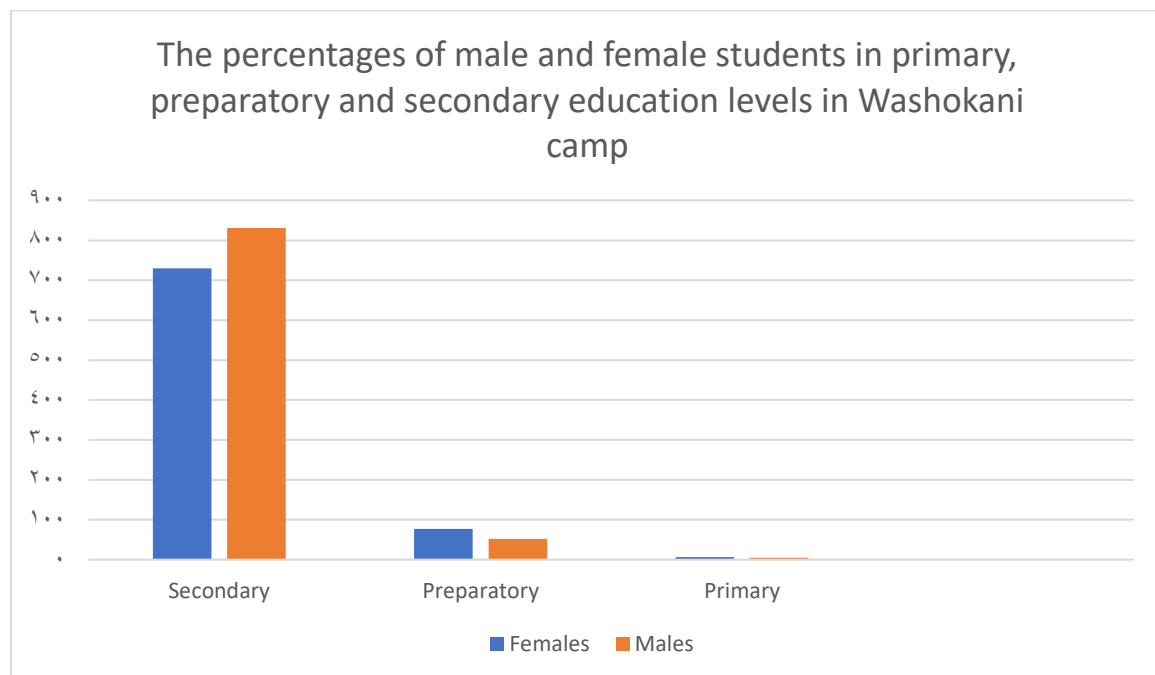
The Self-Administration's reliance on international and local organizations to compensate the displaced with an educational system compatible with their double need for education has not yielded any real projects. In fact, the donor countries, which devote a great deal of money to the rest of the Syrian regions, have not fulfilled their humanitarian duty towards IDPs from the occupied Kurdish cities. The cities that have supported the countries of the international coalition in their war on terrorism, found themselves betrayed by unfair international politics, which is supposedly biased only towards the truth.

Children and their displaced families have paid dearly due to the policy of demographic change, both in terms of education and therefore the loss of the future, which forces children in one way or another to engage in militarism as one of the most accessible possibilities in a world where the supreme law is war. As far as social development and self-perception are concerned, uneducated society plunges into the most violent abyss.

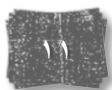
Although local civic organizations depend in their activities on grants provided by international organizations or some development programs of European governments, these grants remain within minimum limits. Not to mention the lack of transparency regarding this file, which must be taken within the framework of an urgent emergency plan. It is worth noting, reiterating the essential needs of all those living in Northeastern Syria. Reminding that the current conditions of life, the primitiveness of administrative policies and their excessive ideologies, are more than enough grounds to destroy any society, regardless of its cultural and heritage solidity. Not to mention the heinous war that turned Syria into a home for everything corrupt in the world. If education is not taken seriously and international bodies do not take action in support of education, develop its curricula, establish appropriate infrastructure, and free curricula of doctrinal ideologies, where support for education is conditioned by democratic values, the international community will be condemned for its failure to fulfill its moral responsibility and for what owes it to this community, which sacrificed its most precious possession, the lives of its children, in order to fight extremist Salafist movements and live life in peace.

Illustrative Chart No (1):

The percentages of male and female students in primary, preparatory and secondary education levels in Washokani camp.

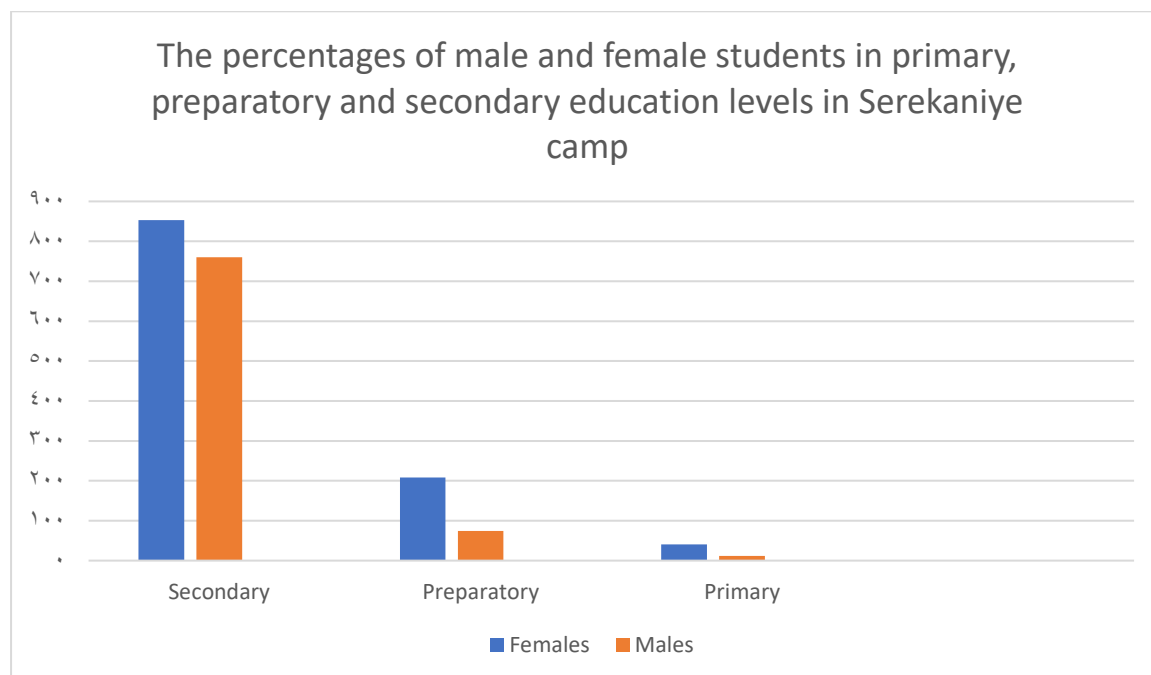


This chart shows the percentages of male and female students in the primary, preparatory and secondary educational levels in Washokani camp in the areas under the control of the Self-Administration. (Source: Spokesperson for the Schools Authority in Serekaniye camp).



Illustrative Chart No (2):

the percentages of male and female students in the primary, preparatory and secondary educational levels in Serekaniye camp.



This chart shows the percentages of male and female students in the primary, preparatory and secondary educational levels in Serekaniye camp in the areas under the control of the Self-Administration. (Source: Spokesperson for the Schools Authority in Serekaniye camp).



The Impact of CSOs on the Stereotyping of Women's Image

Rojda Ali