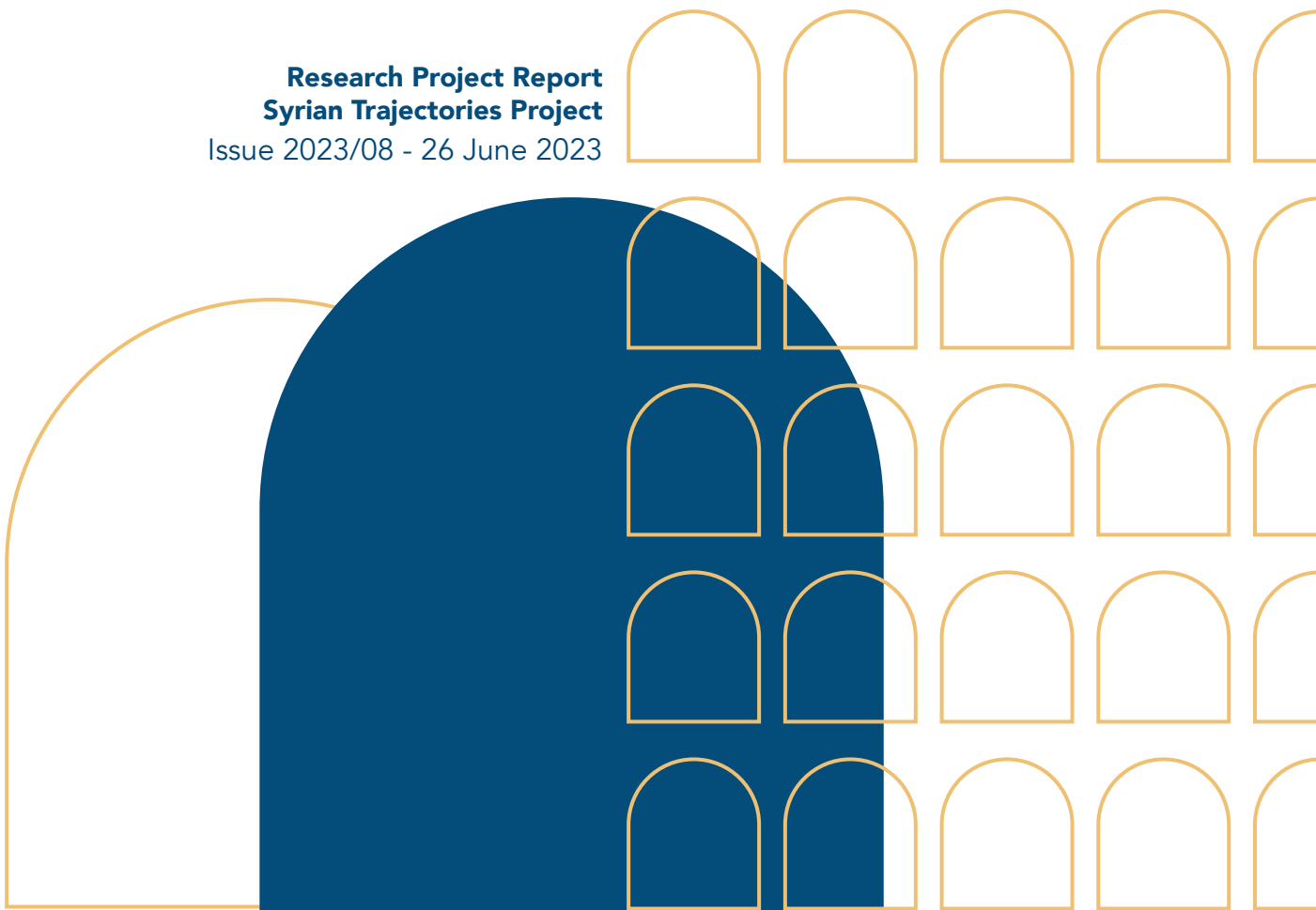


# Education – an Arena of Political Contestation: The Case of Qamishli City in North-Eastern Syria

Salwa Al-Ahmad

Research Project Report  
Syrian Trajectories Project  
Issue 2023/08 - 26 June 2023



© European University Institute, 2023. All rights reserved. Licensed to the European Union under conditions.  
Editorial matter and selection © Salwa Al-Ahmad, 2023

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by  
European University Institute (EUI)  
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014  
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy

This project is funded by the European Union and Germany as part of the Syria Peace Initiative implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). Views and opinions expressed in our publications are solely those of the individual authors and do not represent those of donors, GIZ, or European University Institute.

# **Education – an Arena of Political Contestation: The Case of Qamishli City in North-Eastern Syria**

**Salwa Al-Ahmad\***

---

\* Salwa Al-Ahmad is a Syrian researcher working for the Syrian Trajectories project hosted by Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute. Her research focuses on local governance in north-east Syria, with a particular emphasis on the education sector.

# Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Introduction</b>  | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>1. An Overview of Education in Qamishli City</b>                                    | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>2. Contestation Over Education in Qamishli City: Motives and Instruments</b>        | <b>10</b> |
| 2.1. The Syrian Regime: Motives and Instruments for Controlling Education              | 10        |
| 2.2. The AANES: Motives and Instruments for Controlling Education                      | 11        |
| <b>3. Insider Perspectives: Dissatisfaction with the Education Systems in Qamishli</b> | <b>13</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b>  | <b>15</b> |

## Executive Summary

Since its formation in 2018, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has controlled most of Qamishli city. The Syrian regime, on the other hand, maintained a presence in a small area known as the 'security square.' This led to the emergence of two distinct governance systems in the region, with education becoming a sphere of competition between the two parties.

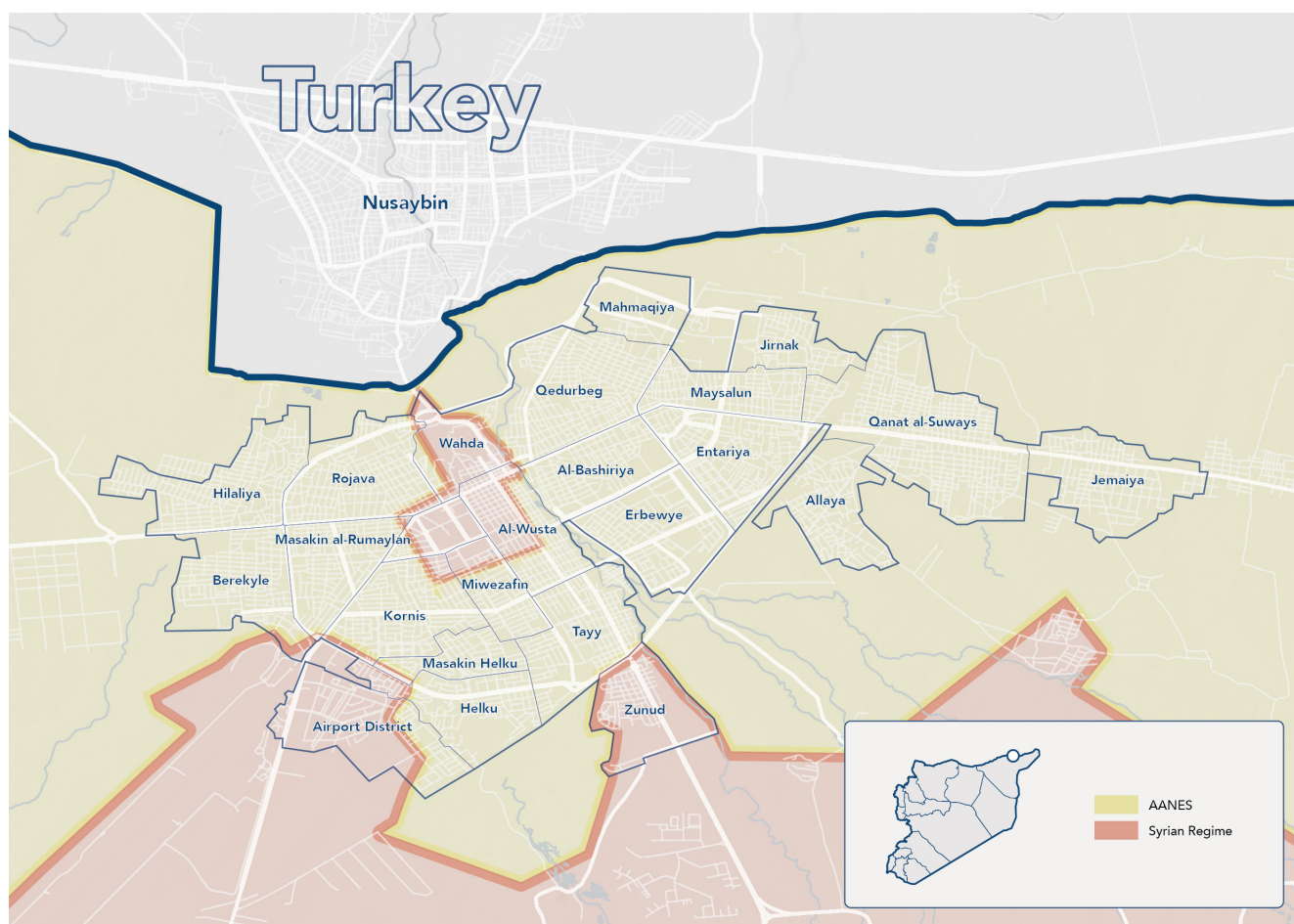
In Qamishli city, the provision of education remains crucial for both the regime and the AANES in their pursuit of legitimacy and control over the local population. Despite the AANES's efforts to recognise the right of Kurdish students to learn in their mother tongue and to improve their education, there is widespread disagreement in local society regarding the rapid implementation of curricula and closure by the AANES of alternative forms of education. The Syrian regime, on the other hand, capitalises on the international recognition of its certificates to attract students and reaffirm its authority in the city.

The ongoing power struggle between the Syrian regime and the AANES over control of education in Qamishli has had significant adverse consequences on education in the city. Against a backdrop of declining quality of public education, for many families private schools and institutes have become the main option to obtain recognised certificates, but their high costs and limited access to them contribute to social and gender inequality.

## Introduction

After the withdrawal of regime forces, over a period of several months in 2012 the Democratic Union Party (PYD) swiftly took control of areas in northern Syria with a majority of Kurdish inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Having gained effective control of security and governance in the region, the PYD then established a de-facto autonomous administration, which in 2018 developed into the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). In certain cities, however, the Syrian regime retained a strategic foothold and exerted control over some aspects of local governance. In Qamishli city in al-Hasakah governorate, while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – the armed wing of the AANES – and the *Asayish* – the Kurdish internal security force – operated in the eastern and western parts of the city, the Syrian regime maintained a presence in a small pocket of the city commonly referred to as the ‘security square’ (see Map 1).

**Map 1. The division of territorial control in Qamishli city**



As a consequence, two distinct governance systems have emerged and are functioning in the region, one led by the government and the other by the AANES. While these governance structures may operate in parallel, such as in the provision of security and healthcare services, or overlap, in areas such as land transactions and construction, they are also in direct contestation with each other, which is most evident in the education sector.<sup>2</sup> In Qamishli city, both the AANES and the Syrian government have transformed education into a sphere of competition for authority and effective control over the local population.

1 Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Civil Resistance to Military Conscription in Kurdish Areas of Northern Syria: The Untold Story," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, no.12(3), 104-110, <https://bit.ly/3pPulGY>

2 Interview with a civilian in Qamishli city, October 2022.

Previous research has examined the dynamic political landscape of the region since the establishment of the AANES.<sup>3</sup> Most of this literature has focused on security,<sup>4</sup> economic issues<sup>5</sup> and governance in the broader north-east region.<sup>6</sup> In this broad context education has primarily been seen as falling entirely under the authority of the AANES.<sup>7</sup> While these studies have provided a general assessment of educational needs,<sup>8</sup> the curriculum and its role in building new ideologies,<sup>9</sup> they have failed to explore education as a sphere of political contestation in areas where territorial control is fragmented, as in the case of Qamishli city.

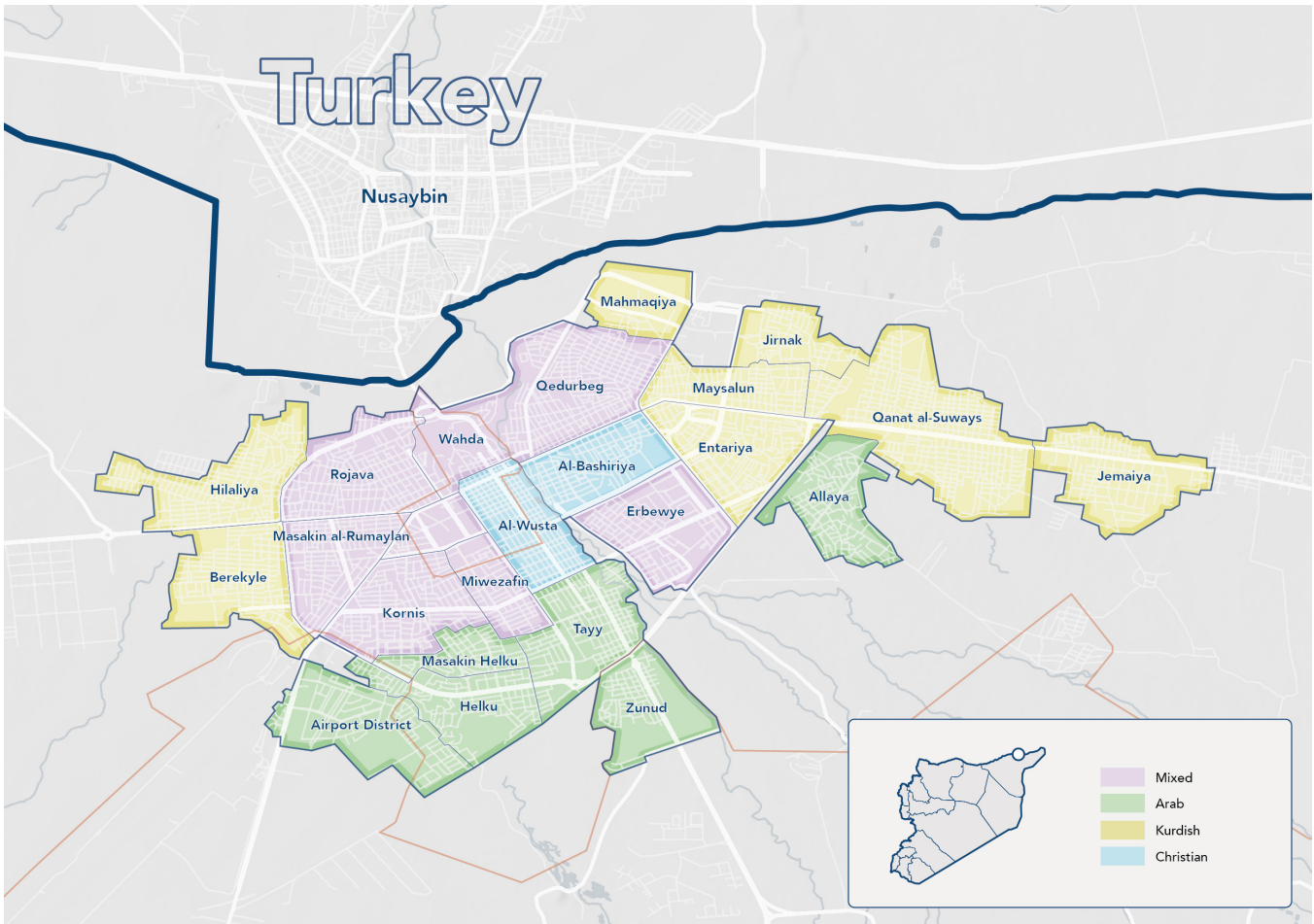
To fill this gap, this paper examines the ways in which education is used as a tool of domination by the two parties in Qamishli city and the impact of this contestation on future generations. The paper draws on 28 semi-structured interviews conducted remotely between October and December 2022 with local civilians, government officials and education employees affiliated with the Syrian regime and AANES in Qamishli city. The sampling process took into account the diverse ethnic and religious composition of Qamishli city. The paper provides an overview of education in the city since 2011. It analyses the strategies employed by the parties to encourage enrolment in their schools and examines the responses of civilians. The paper concludes with an account of local preferences and opinions regarding the education systems in Qamishli city.

- 
- 3 Vittoria Federici, "The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2015): 81-90, <http://bit.ly/3HJ3li1>
  - 4 Chelsea Vogel, "The Viability of Democratic Governance in De Facto States: A Comparative Case Study of Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria Rojava," Thesis (University of South Florida, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3loruvN>
  - 5 Sinan Hatahet, "The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 29 November 2019), <https://bit.ly/3BfkFlt>
  - 6 Rana Khalaf, "Governing Rojava: Layers of Legitimacy in Syria," 2016, *Chatham House for the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 8 December 2016, <https://bit.ly/3OCxmVK>
  - 7 USAID, "Syria Essential Services II: Northeast Syria Education Sector Assessment," May 2019, <https://bit.ly/3E6NOaN>
  - 8 REACH, "Factsheet: Education Needs Assessment North East Syria May-June 2018," 30 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/3YEyAkS>
  - 9 Pinar Dinc, "The Content of School Textbooks In (Nation) States and "Stateless Autonomies:" A Comparison of Turkey and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava)," *Nations and Nationalism* 4, vol. 26 (2020):994-1014, <https://bit.ly/3LWPeHV>

# 1. An Overview of Education in Qamishli City

The city of Qamishli is located in al-Hasakah governorate in north-east Syria. Qamishli is an ethnically mixed city (see Map 2).<sup>10</sup> In November 2021, the population was estimated at 280,000 people, with Arabs and Kurds making up the majority of the local population, with a sizeable Christian, largely Syriac, minority.<sup>11</sup>

Map 2. The ethnic composition of Qamishli city



Prior to 2011 the city of Qamishli had more than 140 public primary, secondary and high schools, eight private primary and secondary schools that were run by the various Christian communities (i.e. church schools), and two private high schools.<sup>12</sup> These schools were directly supervised by the Ministry of Education and they employed over 9,000 teachers, who taught the official curriculum.<sup>13</sup> In 2010, the total number of students in the primary, secondary and high schools, both public and private, was reportedly around 58,000.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, most of the schools in Qamishli city had high attendances. According to 2011 statistics, the illiteracy rate in Qamishli was reportedly the lowest in the governorate.<sup>15</sup>

10 UNHCR, “UNHCR Syria/Qamishli SO End of Year 2017/ Factsheet,” 2017 <https://bit.ly/43m3Szj>

11 IMMAP, “Northeastern Syria December 2021 Return and Reintegration Profile No.16 Quamishli City,” December 2021, <https://bit.ly/3M5lcXg>

12 Interview with a government official in al-Hasakah directorate of education, al-Hasakah, October 2022.

13 Urban Analysis Network – Syria, “Quamishli – Localized Needs Assessment,” *United Nation*, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3LLeoce>

14 Interview with former official at the Education Committee, Qamishli, November 2022.

15 Younis Khalaf, “Results of the Socio-Economic Survey in al-Hasakah” (in Arabic), *Al-Thawra*, 8 July 2012, <https://bit.ly/3nGcXDY>



In terms of infrastructure, most public schools in Qamishli were poorly maintained and inadequate for the number of students enrolled. They lacked laboratories, libraries and other essential facilities and their furniture was often worn out. However, the Directorate of Education in al-Hasakah had limited funds for repairs and replacements. As a result, there were concerns among the local population about the safety and infrastructure of public educational facilities, including problems such as insufficient heating fuel.<sup>16</sup> Due to the limited resources, structural maintenance of schools was prioritised throughout the governorate. The private schools, however, were generally well-maintained and in good condition.<sup>17</sup> Although poor maintenance is a known obstacle to education, socio-economic and cultural factors have also been reported to hinder access to education. In many cases, families do not prioritise education as a means of securing their children's future, and instead put greater emphasis on their ability to provide for them financially by working.

After the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the education sector in Qamishli was impacted by changes in territorial control. With more than 90% of the schools located outside the regime's security square, the AANES exerted significant control over education in the city. This occurred gradually between 2015 and 2017 for primary schools and in 2018 for secondary schools, and was largely dependent on the readiness of the AANES's educational workforce and implementation of a new curriculum. The process of the AANES creating an education system commenced in 2013. It started with the establishment of institutes to train teachers to teach in the Kurdish language and to implement a new curriculum. In 2015, additional institutes were created to train Syriac and Arabic teachers on the new curriculum and prepare them to assume their roles in the AANES educational institutions.

Teacher preparation typically took three to six months, and annual summer courses were provided to support curriculum updates. The majority of teachers had preparatory and secondary degrees, while only 30% had a university degree.<sup>18</sup> Because the schools in Qamishli were not significantly damaged in the conflict, the AANES did not build new ones but focused on renovating and restoring existing premises. Between 2016 and December 2022, more than 65 schools in the city underwent light renovation, while a smaller number underwent structural maintenance. Some of these schools were used to host pre-school children, while other educational facilities were repurposed as military or administrative centres.<sup>19</sup>

By 2022, AANES controlled almost 90% of the schools in Qamishli city. 2,300 teachers are registered and more than 16,000 students are enrolled in these the primary, secondary and high schools and follow AANES curricula in the Kurdish, Syriac and Armenian languages. The Syrian Ministry of Education, on the other hand, administers about 20 schools in the security square. Approximately 2,600 teachers and 405 administrative personnel are employed in government schools,<sup>20</sup> with approximately 45,000 students enrolled in primary and secondary schools and about 8,300 students in high schools.<sup>21</sup>

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of private schools and institutes that teach formal curricula in the city.<sup>22</sup> In December 2020 there were more than 40 private schools and institutes,<sup>23</sup> with 12 having a licence from the Ministry of Education while the rest operated with temporary licenses lasting one year or were awaiting their licenses and were operating with the implicit consent (and promise) of the Ministry of Education.<sup>24</sup> The average tuition fees in new private schools in September 2022 were SYP 800,000 for elementary school, SYP 1 million for middle school and SYP

---

16 Urban Analysis Network – Syria, "Qamishli – Localized Needs Assessment".

17 Interview with AANES ex-official in the education sector, Qamishli, November 2022.

18 Interview with AANES official in the education sector, Qamishli, November 2022.

19 Interview with AANES official in the education sector, Qamishli, November 2022.

20 Interview with an official in the Directorate of Education, Qamishli, October 2022.

21 Most of these students live outside the security square.

22 Interview with an education official, al-Hasakah governorate, October 2022.

23 They have opened and closed multiple times since 2011 due to pressure from AANES to cease teaching formal curricula.

24 Interview with the owner of a private institute, Qamishli, October 2022.

1.2 million for high school (equivalent to USD 265, USD 332 and USD 398 respectively, at the official exchange rate of 3,015 SYP/USD in that period). Christian private schools, which are affiliated with various Christian Church denominations, remain outside the control of the AANES, even those located outside the regime-held security square. Christian private schools continue to teach the government curriculum but they are overcrowded, accommodating students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Contestation Over Education in Qamishli City: Motives and Instruments

Education has become a battleground for control and authority between the Syrian regime and the AANES in Qamishli city. Contestation over education began in 2015 when a Kurdish Institute (sezya zimanê kurdi)<sup>26</sup> chose to teach in the Kurdish language in the area between al-Malikiyah (Dayrik) city and al-Hasakah city.<sup>27</sup> In response, the Syrian Ministry of Education ordered the closure of schools teaching in the Kurdish language, interrupting children's education.<sup>28</sup> An agreement was later reached to teach Kurdish for a few hours alongside Arabic in public schools. However, the volatile political and military climate often resulted in schools opening and closing. The conflict intensified in subsequent years, leading to closure by the AANES of primary, secondary and high schools affiliated with the Syrian Ministry of Education. In their quest for control, both sides implemented coercive measures and incentives to attract enrolments and exert influence over the local population.

### 2.1. The Syrian Regime: Motives and Instruments for Controlling Education

From the beginning of the uprising in 2011, the Syrian regime made it a priority to keep running state agencies to demonstrate its indispensable role as provider of essential services. Despite partially withdrawing from Qamishli city, the regime continued to attempt to maintain control over several administrative entities and demonstrate its authority by paying the salaries of public sector employees and monopolising the provision of certain services, where possible. Despite partially withdrawing from Qamishli city, the regime sought to maintain its grip on educational institutions to assert its power and undermine AANES governance in the city. Official textbooks served as a means for the regime to promote its legitimacy as the only lawful authority in Syria, while discrediting the legitimacy of opposition forces.<sup>29</sup>

While the Ministry of Education does not have control over all the schools in Qamishli city, the regime has continued to work to undermine the legitimacy of the AANES educational system. One of its main strategies is to attract the highest numbers of students, which is achieved using two core tactics. First, it relies on the international recognition of its own education institutions, which are the only ones capable of issuing certificates recognised internationally.<sup>30</sup> Second, it has taken steps to expand its education infrastructure and provide facilities aimed at increasing student enrolments in public schools. These measures include overcrowding classrooms with an excessive number of students (sometimes

---

25 For example, circa 40% of the students in the Syriac school located in the western part of the city which is outside the security square are Kurdish students.

26 The Kurdish Language Institute was established secretly in 2003 to train teachers and interested members in the Kurdish language. Following the establishment of the AANES education department, the institute works exclusively on research regarding the Kurdish language. See KCK Education Committee, "Meeting with the Kurdish Language Institute," *PNDK*, 2 July 2020, <http://bit.ly/3x8KEPJ>.

27 Shivan Ibrahim, "Education in Ethnically Mixed Areas of Northeastern Syria," *IMPACT*, December 2020, <https://bit.ly/3IC3D2w>.

28 Ibid.

29 Muhammad Masud, "Authoritarian Claims to Legitimacy: Syria's Education under the Regime of Bashar al-Assad," *Mediterranean Studies* 26, no. 1 (2018): 80-111, <https://bit.ly/311JyuS>.

30 UNICEF MENA Regional Office, "Curriculum, Accreditation and Certification for Syrian Children in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt," UNICEF, March 2015, <https://bit.ly/3YQE2S6>

exceeding 85), implementing multiple shifts in each school (up to three shifts),<sup>31</sup> utilising all available spaces to expand schools (such as converting basements of government buildings into classrooms) and incorporating prefabricated rooms provided by UNICEF<sup>32</sup> in school playgrounds to accommodate additional students.<sup>33</sup> Third, it aims to attract students who are enrolled in AANES-controlled schools. To achieve this, the regime facilitates the admission of these students to take official exams, even if they have not previously been enrolled in public schools. The regime also makes it easier to obtain licenses for private schools and institutes that aim to teach the official curriculum. These were difficult to obtain before 2011.<sup>34</sup>

Simultaneously, the regime implements a dual strategy regarding teachers who have lost their jobs due to the lack of educational facilities. On the one hand, it continues to provide them with salaries, ensuring they remain financially supported. On the other hand, the regime utilises coercive measures, threatening to dismiss teachers who display an interest in working with the AANES administration. These persuasive and coercive actions are intended to send a clear message to the local population that the regime will not abandon education and will never recognise the AANES education system.

## 2.2. The AANES: Motives and Instruments for Controlling Education

For the AANES, controlling education has emerged as a top priority in recent years. This is, first, because the AANES considers education an essential part of generating legitimacy in governing the city.<sup>35</sup> Second, it is due to an ideological belief in shaping a new political community that recognises ethnic diversity.<sup>36</sup> Third, it is because many PYD leaders believe that education will eventually be part of a Syrian political bargain in the future. This viewpoint was expressed by a high-level AANES official: “We have schools, educational staff, a curriculum and universities. We are having generations graduating from our education system and a whole staff making a living out of it. No regime or any other international authority can deny this or remove the right of our graduates and students to be recognised. It is a matter of time, and a political solution will be found.”<sup>37</sup>

Recognising the challenges posed by the lack of recognition of its schools and the resulting impact on enrolments, the AANES has implemented a range of incentive measures to encourage student enrolments. First, it has reaffirmed and emphasised key principles in governing the region, which include concepts of ethnic representation, democracy, decentralisation and participatory methods of education. According to high level AANES official , “AANES schools focus on the quality of education through a participatory approach that helps construct students’ free opinions and their free spirit. This approach in itself is an incentive for families to enrol their children in our schools.”<sup>38</sup>

Second, unlike government schools, AANES ensured that schools are well equipped and classes are not overcrowded, which positively affects the quality of education.<sup>39</sup> Third, the AANES has introduced a policy of admitting university students without a need for written exams, thus removing the financial

---

31 In order to do this, all subjects that are considered unnecessary such as sports, music, arts, etc. have been cancelled to shorten the daily school hours. Interview with a schoolteacher in Qamishli, 20 November 2022.

32 SANA, “Installing 50 Prefabricated Classrooms in al-Hasakah and Qamishli Schools” (in Arabic), 23 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/42indkO>

33 Rooms were first added in 2016, followed by 16 more rooms in 2018 and an additional 21 rooms in 2019. Each room measures 5 metres wide by 7 metres long. SANA, “Installing 50 Prefabricated Classrooms in al-Hasakah and Qamishli Schools.”

34 Interview with a schoolteacher, Qamishli, 20 November 2022.

35 Interview with an AANES official, Qamishli, 30 October 2022.

36 Elise Boyle Espinosa and Adam Ronan, “Rojava’s ‘War of Education: the Role of Education in Building a Revolutionary Political Community in North and East Syria,” *Third World Quarterly*, September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3OANIhu>

37 Interview with an AANES official, Qamishli, October 2022.

38 Interview with AANES official in education sector, Qamishli, November 2022.

39 Ibid.

burden of education and private courses to prepare for final exams.<sup>40</sup> This has been welcomed by many locals as it saves families from financial burdens and avoids turning education into a commercial process.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the AANES offered potential employment opportunities to students and families. Graduates from AANES institutes and universities have priority in employment in AANES governance, making it an attractive option for those seeking employment opportunities in the region.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the AANES has reportedly resorted to coercive measures designed to prevent enrolment in public schools. First, the AANES has attempted to impede student access to government schools situated in the security square by obstructing their transport. For example, *Asayish* checkpoints have seized school buses and arrested drivers.<sup>43</sup> Second, the AANES has sought to interrupt teaching the government curriculum. In many cases, the AANES has imposed restrictions on private teaching and *Asayish* forces have arrested teachers who teach the government curriculum in private lessons. Moreover, in September 2022, AANES issued an order to close private institutes and schools that were teaching the official curriculum and located outside the security square.<sup>44</sup> In response, families protested in front of the UN centre in the city. However, *Asayish* forces present in plain clothes reportedly assaulted civilians who participated in the protests. Journalists were also assaulted for reporting on the school closures or criticising the AANES educational policies.<sup>45</sup> Despite these challenges, locals organised home schooling, and many empty houses in the security square were turned into schools to keep education going.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the AANES has threatened its employees who enrol their children in private or government schools to learn the official curriculum with suspended salaries or dismissal if they do not enrol their children in AANES schools.<sup>47</sup>

Church schools teaching the official curriculum have not been exempt from repressive AANES policies. In 2018 these schools received a first notice to change to the AANES curriculum or close. At that time, leaders of Christian churches negotiated with the AANES forces and the schools were re-opened. Again, in October 2022, the AANES sent a notice to these schools asking them to stop teaching the official curriculum and to adopt the AANES one under penalty of closure. However, this request was refused in an official statement by the Syriac Archbishop of the Jazira region in which he expressed his rejection of any interference in the affairs of Syriac schools, stressing that they would continue teaching the Syrian government curriculum. He mentioned a compromise that had been offered him, according to which schools could continue teaching the official curriculum on condition that they expelled Arab, Kurdish and Yazidi students and exclusively kept Syriac students. However, this offer was rejected by the schools since they considered it racial discrimination.<sup>48</sup>

---

40 The AANES education system has a different approach to education compared to the Syrian regime, including efforts to reform the evaluation system. AANES now uses various methods of evaluation, such as interviews, presentations, short tests and papers, and also considers moral aspects of students' performance. This holistic approach extends to university admissions too, with courses open to anyone with a high school certificate.

41 Interview with a student in an AANES school, Qamishli, October 2022.

42 Interview with an official in the Education Authority in northeast Syria, Qamishli, November 2022.

43 To circumvent these obstacles, locals began using smaller vehicles like cars and motorbikes, dropping off the students a few metres before checkpoints and picking them up again a few meters afterwards.

44 One school owner explained that they gave "us one week's notice to close the school, they accuse us of teaching al-Baath ideas to Kurdish students. Parents have already paid the tuition fees for the year, and they count on us to find alternative solutions to continue teaching their children before they lose their future." Interview with the owner of a private school, Qamishli, November 2022.

45 SYRIA TV, "Revolutionary Youth Assaults a Journalist While Covering Protests in Qamishli" (in Arabic), 28 September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3B7dEgH>

46 Interview with the owner of a private school, Qamishli, November 2022.

47 Interview with a former AANES employee, Germany, October 2022.

48 Assi Mina, "Syria: The Fate of Syriac Schools in al-Hasakah Towards the Unknown" (in Arabic), 15 November 2022, <https://bit.ly/3VJukXo>

### 3. Insider Perspectives: Dissatisfaction with the Education Systems in Qamishli

The ongoing power struggle between the Syrian regime and the AANES over control of education in Qamishli has had significant adverse consequences, leading to a decline in the quality of education.

While public schools continue to attract the majority of the local population due to a desire for international recognition, especially regarding diplomas and certificates, learning conditions in them are far from ideal. Overcrowded classrooms pose a significant challenge for public schools. With class sizes reaching as many as 85 students, teachers find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer number of students they must attend to. The pace at which new students are admitted further exacerbates the situation. With the need to accommodate more students, there is little opportunity for teachers to establish a conducive learning environment or engage in meaningful educational activities. One student explained why he enrolled and the overall situation as follows: "I enrolled in the public school to obtain an accredited certificate for future travel and study abroad, but with 85 students in a class, it's impossible to concentrate or learn effectively."<sup>49</sup>

Overcrowding and the pressure to enrol more students have created substantial barriers to effective learning. With classrooms bursting at the seams, it has become increasingly challenging for teachers to provide students with meaningful instruction and individual attention. One teacher in Qamishli stated "We're no longer truly engaged in teaching. Many students now depend on private lessons for their education. I find myself frequently questioning the purpose of our presence here and the purpose of these schools when students are unable to learn effectively due to overcrowding and the rushed enrolment of more students."<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, many interviewees expressed concerns regarding AANES schools. The lack of accreditation of the AANES curriculum by the Syrian government or any international authority remains the main concern for the local population. For many locals, without such accreditation, students may face challenges when it comes to further education or pursuing certain career paths. Moreover, parents fear that their children's time will be wasted and their future compromised if AANES loses control over Qamishli city. One local explained, "If I send my children to AANES schools, I feel like I'm wasting their time and life since their certificates are not accredited. What will happen to their future if AANES loses control of the city?"<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, many locals expressed criticism of the inclusion of political content in the AANES curriculum. One civilian eloquently expressed this viewpoint: "I am Kurdish, but I am also Syrian. I have certain traditions and beliefs. I do not want my children to only learn about Abdullah Öcalan.<sup>52</sup> If you want to teach them about the political history of the nation, you need to be inclusive; otherwise, you are making the same mistake as the al-Assad regime."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, while the problems of a politicised curriculum, a lack of qualified staff and a corrupt employment process have been historically present in public schools, the local population tends to be more critical of these issues in the AANES schools. This is because many locals believe that the AANES represents a relatively new system, and it is expected to align with the principles of democracy and free will that the administration advocates.

---

49 Interview with a student in Qamishli, November 2022.

50 Interview with a teacher in a public high school in Qamishli, November 2022.

51 Interview with a civilian in Qamishli, November 2022.

52 Abdullah Öcalan is leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish militant political organisation and armed guerrilla movement.

53 Interview with a civilian in Qamishli, November 2022.



Finally, employment at AANES schools is largely perceived by many locals to prioritise political alignment over teaching skill, quality of teaching and the validity of education.<sup>54</sup> Many people, including teachers and members of the local community, have expressed reservations about how hiring decisions are made in AANES schools. One teacher explained, “I know the teachers hired to develop the curriculum in AANES schools, and I have concerns about their qualifications. The qualifications of the teachers employed are questionable, and six months of preparation is inadequate to prepare them for the teaching profession.”<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, private schools and institutes have become a preferred option for students to obtain recognised certificates and improve their learning. In December 2020, there were over 40 institutes and private schools, 12 of which were licensed by the Ministry of Education and the others were operating with its implicit consent while awaiting their licenses. The proliferation of private institutions has created a lucrative job market for the owners, teachers and administrative staff of these institutions, and also in the private transport sector. It has also led to increases in rental prices for premises located in the security square, from about USD 50 to around USD 1,000 between 2018 and 2022.<sup>56</sup> Most of the owners attempt to evade orders from the AANES to close down these institutes. These economic pressures have made private schools and institutes even more costly, which exacerbates the financial burden on many families.<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, accessing private church schools is difficult as there are few of them and they prioritise Christian students. For non-Christian students, the annual tuition fee is double to limit their access. Private institutes are also expensive, especially in relation to basic income,<sup>58</sup> with the tuition fees varying across subjects. For instance, mathematics and physics can cost up to USD 2,000 per subject annually, which is divided among the students in the class.<sup>59</sup> The lack of access to private education due to high costs and lack of space in church schools is increasing social and gender inequality. Families are forced to choose to enrol only one or two children in schools, with males often being preferred over females. This not only limits educational opportunities but also perpetuates discriminatory social norms.

While families with the financial means often choose to enrol their children in private schools, government schools remain the primary preference for the majority of the local population due to the desire for international recognition. Although public schools may not necessarily provide better education, aspirations for an accredited certificate that opens doors to opportunities abroad are a significant factor driving the preference for government schools.

---

54 Interview with a teacher in Qamishli, November 2022.

55 Interview with a teacher in Qamishli, October 2022.

56 The rise in rental prices can be traced back to 2018, when AANES initially issued an order prohibiting private institutes from teaching the formal curriculum. However, rental prices reached their peak at the beginning of the school year 2022/2023, when AANES implemented the closure of private schools and institutes located outside the security square.

57 Majd Al-Salem, “Qamishli: Private Schools Costs Hundreds of Thousands and Also in Dollars” (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 19 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3lwK2H>

58 The minimum monthly salary of workers in the education sector in AANES is SYP 520,000 (equivalent to USD 79.60 at the official exchange rate of 6,532 SYP/USD).

59 Enab Baladi, “Al-Qamishli. ‘Private Lessons’ Cost Hundreds of Thousands, and also in Dollars.”

## Conclusion

In Qamishli city, both the regime and the AANES continue to employ incentive and coercive measures to maximise student enrolments in their schools. Providing education remains crucial for both parties in their pursuit of legitimacy and control over the local population. Nevertheless, despite efforts by the AANES to recognise the right of Kurds to learn in their mother tongue and have improved education, there is widespread disagreement in local society regarding the rapid implementation of curricula and closure of alternative educational opportunities by the AANES. This creates a contentious environment where there are differing perspectives and concerns. The Syrian regime, on the other hand, capitalises on the international recognition of its certificates to attract students and reaffirm its authority in the city. This contestation, which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, indicates that education will be a major area in any future negotiations between the two parties in the region. The consequences of this current impasse are profound and they affect the quality of education, exacerbate social divisions and limit opportunities for young people.

Despite attempts at negotiations between AANES and regime officials, resolution has not been reached so far. However, the evolving Syrian-Turkish rapprochement, Syrian-Arab relations and the support of the United States for AANES may play roles in shaping the political environment and therefore the education system in the region.

While education does not appear to be the primary issue or an insurmountable obstacle in negotiations between the competing parties in Qamishli, potential future settlements could involve bringing all schools under the Ministry of Education, retraining AANES education staff and integrating them in the ministry, implementing training courses and exams for students to align them with the formal curriculum and incorporating some Kurdish language instruction in public schools. However, a less optimistic scenario might involve dismissal of education staff and a rapid implementation of a new curriculum to allow students to pass Ministry of Education exams. Overall, education in Qamishli remains a critical aspect of the ongoing conflict, and resolution will require complex negotiations and compromises between the parties involved. Finding a sustainable and inclusive solution that prioritises the needs and aspirations of the local population remains a pressing challenge in order to secure a brighter future for education in the region.

**Research Project Report**

Issue 2023/08

26 June 2023

doi:10.2870/329945

ISBN:978-92-9466-463-1

QM-04-23-700-EN-N



Publications Office  
of the European Union

