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Unity Begins and Ends with Education Initiatives in Northern Syria

by Kenneth R. Rosen

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Brief Analysis

For years, progressive education has been a cornerstone in the Autonomous Administration in Northeastern Syria. It is now one of several components hampering regional unity.

Jihan Mohammad sat flanked by her children in a high-ceiling, single-room home in the northern Syrian city of Qamishli. Her son, Miran, was attending second grade at the Syrian regime school inside the Kurdish city that, though within the Autonomous Administration, also has an established and stable regime presence.

Spread before us were Miran's school books: one for English, one for Islamic Education, another for math, and several more with the Syrian Arab Republic flag emblazoned on the front cover. The book's pages were tattered from years being passed between and shared among families here.

When Jihan wanted to pick a school for her children, she had two options: the regime's standard Arabic-language curriculum and the Autonomous Administration's new Kurdish-language curriculum. A third option exists in certain areas: the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund curriculum taught in Deir al-Zour, Aleppo, and several other areas of the northeast, is recognized by the Syrian regime.

Though Jihan is Kurdish, the Syrian regime school in Qamishli was an easy choice. "Education is very useful. But here in Qamishli, we have both Kurdish and Arabic curriculum, so honestly, I would prefer the Arabic one. The universities in Damascus are all Arabic," Jihan told me. "All the people think the Kurdish curriculum is difficult

although they want their children to speak different languages, which is good for them. But it is difficult." Jihan's fourth-grade daughter Rohat had just transferred from the autonomous administration's Kurdish-language school in the northeast based on this reasoning.

As the autonomous administration seeks to establish itself as a government for the people living in territory gained from the regime and Islamic State group, education has become a priority. The self-administration has created education materials in Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac, along with schools to teach them, in an effort to diversify the region's schooling options. The self administration has distributed roughly 2 million copies of its own textbooks in Kurdish and Arabic, which crib from the regime curriculum, but aim to present the educational material without the regime's controversial pretext.

"Anything in Arabic has a slant, so they have this cognitive bias that's hard to get past," said Lucas Chapman, an American working for the self-administration's Curriculum Institute in Qamishli. "I've seen from interacting with these teachers how Baathist everything is. There's a noble goal in all of this [change]: The education system was one of the strongest forms of control by the regime."

But those materials aren't a stand-in for accreditation. When the Autonomous Administration **imposed its own educational curricula**, it created a major crisis because the curricula were not accredited and because it imposed the Kurdish language in all curricula—which even many Kurdish people cannot read after decades of its prohibition in schools under the regime. "The method of imposing the Kurdish language in the curricula in this way is useless and does not benefit education," an independent researcher from Hasakah province and former reporter for Syria Direct who now lives in Jordan told me. "The third matter is that no country recognizes education certificates issued by the Autonomous Administration."

The curriculum likewise does not prepare students to take the national placement exams needed for acceptance by universities across Syria and abroad. As fourth-grader Rojat said her father told her: "'the Kurdish language won't do you any good."

The regime schools that continue to operate in the region—either officially or unofficially—offer an Arabic-language curriculum that is nationally and internationally recognized. For Kurdish leadership in the region, the Syrian regime's "one language, one part, one politics" approach to education is exemplary of the regime's longstanding marginalization of Kurdish identity.

Individual families are torn between deciding to send their children through an established educational pathway or sending students to schools which are at best a glimmer of what is offered by the state and at worst less rigorous.

This lack of official recognition reflects the Autonomous Administration's broader challenges with obtaining international recognition. Though the administration in the northeast took control of state institutions there in July 2012, it has not been officially recognized by the Syrian state or the foreign countries working in Syria, regardless of whether those countries back the Assad regime (Russia, Iran) or the Kurds (the United States).

Education has thus become a cudgel the region seeks to use as leverage toward legitimizing its governing bodies, while also saving the dying Syrian Kurdish dialect and fomenting an understanding of Kurdish history in Syria, which is wholly absent from the regime's Baathist curriculum, with its strong focus on the Baathist interpretation of Arab nationalism.

"Both students and teachers have been negatively impacted. Teachers working with the Self Administration have lost GoS (government of Syria) salaries. Students studying the Self Administration curriculum would be deprived of joining state-run universities, thus losing recognized diplomas," Mohammad Ibrahim, a Syrian researcher and analyst focusing on northeast Syria told me. "Many still choose to join Self Administration universities (less qualified and unrecognized), due to the high costs of travel and study in GoS-held areas."

For Syriac Christians, who have pushed against the Autonomous Administration for fear of a return to regime control in the future and have often chosen to side with the established government, the main issues with the curriculum are "about the true history and culture and Martyrs and political parties of Syriac and other nations here which are not included in the new books," Jalinos Issa, the president of Olaf Taw, an educational institution, told me. The cultural history of Christianity in regime texts, like the Kurds, also took a backseat.

The struggle to enroll students in the curriculum has led to the "Asayish" internal security forces arrested eight teachers from the outskirts of Qamishli for privately teaching the regime's curricula. In February, four more teachers were detained in the city of Amuda, about 30 km to the west of Qamishli. Many of the families I spoke with in Amuda were dissuaded from sending their children to either institution. On one hand, the regime schools were too far and expensive; on the other, the Kurdish schools weren't recognized and meant little if the children had already learned to speak Kurdish at home or, as one child put it, "on the streets."

Janda Ismael teaches math to 7th, 8th, and 9th graders in Kurdish at one of the Autonomous Administration schools. She had taught the Arabic-language regime courses before moving to Amuda where few students were taught the regime curriculum because the nearest regime school was in Qamishli, a commute many could not afford to make. Having taught both curricula, Janda says the resources and lesson plans vary slightly, but otherwise contain much of the same material.

"Especially science books are the same. There might be some units left out in the Kurdish version. Like in the 7th-grade books, one or two units are removed, otherwise, the rest of the books are the same. They haven't changed," she told me. "The Kurdish books contain the same equations, laws, and charts. So there is a very small difference." Janda sees the issue of education as imperative to preserving the Kurdish identity and has hopes that the curriculum will be recognized by the Syrian Arab Republic to allow for those Kurdish-speakers to transfer to state universities.

"Throughout our life and until we grew up to this age, we were desperate to speak our language but we couldn't," she said. "Even if we could, we wouldn't be able to speak it fluently. But when this generation grows up, they will face no fear or barriers. However, it was not like that for us. We were afraid of speaking it. Like when we wanted to listen to a [Kurdish] song, we wouldn't be able to do it in the public. It was not allowed. But they (the new generation) do not face such barriers."

"Families don't accept the Kurdish education because they are afraid our diplomas wouldn't be accredited. But the children are very keen to study it. They love their mother tongue very much. But the families want something that can be recognized. Some time ago, a UNICEF team visited us and said they were studying and considering working on our curriculum, everyone became very happy and the families started to somehow accept it. But that stopped again."

Janda and I were meeting on March 12, during which schools and government buildings were closed in celebration of the **2004 Kurdish uprisings**, known as Serhildan, when demonstrators protested against the Baath regime and toppled statues of Hafez Assad in Amuda. Forty protesters were killed, more than 400 were injured and 2,000 were arrested by state police. The eight-day uprising came to signal the start of a fight toward recognizing the Kurdish population, long absent from political and educational discourse.

It's this reversal of Kurdish identity and the gains made—politically, in autonomy—in recent years that drives the education dispute.

"A whole generation will become disappointed" if the regime returns and shutters Kurdish-language institutions and curricula, Janda told me. "Those schools will be shut down and then, until the children are moved back to the Arabic schools and taught the Arabic language from the beginning, the whole generation will become exhausted, just like when they switched from Arabic to Kurdish. They will do the same." ❖

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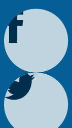

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