

Education Under Exceptional Circumstances: What Can Be Done About Northern Syria?

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Brief Analysis

A decade after disaster struck Syria and its people, Syrian children have suffered immeasurable losses. They are highly vulnerable, cannot protect themselves from surrounding dangers, and will likely experience the effects of these circumstances for their entire lives.

Children affected by the Syrian civil war constitute a wide swath of society, including those born before the war as well as those born during the war. This generation makes up the largest age demographic in Syria. A year before the war, children ages 0 – 14 represented 37% (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/326601/age-structure-in-syria/of>) of the population, while in 2020 they only represented 30%. These children have been deprived of nearly all their basic rights, particularly their right to education. According to the Syrian Center for Policy Research, **half** (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/children-of-syria-by-the-numbers/#:~:text=Of%20the%206.5%20million%20Syrians,have%20become%20life%2Dthreatening%20issues.>) of school-aged children were not enrolled in schools during the 2014-2015 school year.

The educational plight of Syrian children living in areas outside regime control is of critical concern. Educational authorities in these areas have failed to provide sufficient educational opportunities to Syrian children, and local entities have interfered in the country's educational system and modified the contents of educational curricula as a result.

There are more than **639,600 children** (https://acu-sy.org/all-acu-reports/?post_types=imu_reports) ages 6-18 living in eastern and northeastern Syria—including Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Al-Hasakah, and the northern Aleppo countryside—and over **1,453,28 children** (https://acu-sy.org/all-acu-reports/?post_types=imu_reports) ages 6 to 18 living in northwestern Syria—northern and southern Idlib, western Aleppo, Afrin, the northern Aleppo countryside, and northern Hama. **More than half** (<https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/6781/file/The%20effects%20of%20the%20crisis%20on%20education%20in%20areas%20controlled%20by%20the%20government%20of%202015.pdf.pdf>) of these children are not enrolled in school. We therefore know very little about our country's youngest generation and how they spend their time. According to a **study** (<https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-child-labor-in-syria/#:~:text=Children%20are%20working%20in%20more,of%20exploitation%20and%20child%20labor.&text=In%20Damascus%2C%20children%20as%20young,old%20can%20b>) by the Borgen Project, children work in more than 75% of households, and nearly half of these children provide a joint or sole source of income. They are presumably working to support their families by earning small amounts of money, or in the case of Syrian girls, staying at home to help their mothers around the house. Some children are left wandering around during the day, going home only to sleep at night, if they have a home. According to a 2021 UN **report** (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1092252>), over 4,700 verified incidents of physical harassment against children were documented in Syria between July 2018 and June 2020. Homeless children are subject to harassment, **exploited** (<https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/child-labour-caused-by-syrian-crisis>) for cheap or unpaid labor, and recruited to join armed groups.

For the minority of Syrian children who are enrolled in schools, conditions are harsh and not conducive to successful learning. A significant portion of school buildings lack a solid roof, windows or doors, and do not have enough chairs for pupils to sit in. Classes are **overcrowded** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/09/syria-regime-control-daraa-education-schools.html>), with an average of 50 students of different ages and levels packed in the same room or tent with a single teacher. Students lack sufficient class materials, and when they do have access to materials, they are often in poor condition. Many of the roads that students take to school are hazardous—neglected by governing agencies and unsafe due to ongoing fighting—further preventing students from attending school on a regular basis. As a result, educational quality is significantly reduced, as demonstrated by enrolled students' reduced performance levels, and increasing percentages of student dropouts and grade repetitions.

According to a UNICEF **report** (<https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/6781/file/The%20effects%20of%20the%20crisis%20on%20education%20in%20areas%20controlled%20by%20the%20government%20of%202015.pdf.pdf>), since the start of the war, Syrian schools have had to fill vacancies with instructors who lack formal teaching qualifications, and these instructors comprised a quarter of teachers. Moreover, teachers in Syria are likely under significant psychological duress given the past decade of fighting and instability in Syria. Additionally, Syrian teachers tend to follow the education style modeled to them as students, which consists primarily of rote memorization rather than analysis and skill building. In this environment, educators must frequently revise lesson plans to adapt to their students, who continually face unparalleled circumstances.

A major obstacle for educators in Syria is that students who were not enrolled in school when they were younger and are now over 18 years old are entirely illiterate, since they did not receive any education or other form of training when they were children. Given the disruptions to daily life and education over the past decade in Syria, this is a crucial problem facing students there. Moreover, there is insufficient attention given to students with special needs. More than half of children with special needs are not enrolled in school. The training centers that currently exist **fail to meet** (<https://our-syria.com/50906/>) their specific, complex needs.

We must think outside the box to deliver better-quality schooling to all Syrian children, and to ensure additional training is provided to youth who have been deprived of educational opportunities. This will require addressing the following key questions: How can we increase the number of students (i.e. quantitative competencies) for students enrolled in the Syrian educational system? And how can we improve educational standards (i.e. qualitative competencies) for these students? Furthermore, how can we best support youth who have missed out on previous educational opportunities and need basic skills and vocational training?

The current educational system, such as it is, enrolls **half** (https://acu-sy.org/all-acu-reports/?post_types=imu_reports) of Syrian children aged 6-18 and follows a systematic approach comprised of a classes, curricula, and exams. Some areas are under the auspices of the Interim Government's Ministry of Education, some are under the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib, while still others operate under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava). All three of these sectors need extensive reform at all levels of the educational systems, including:

- Standardizing educational curricula by adopting a revised Syrian curriculum, removing remnants of Ba'ath party ideology, and preventing other entities from meddling with the curricula

- Improving educational infrastructure such as classroom materials, drinking water access, bathroom facilities and accommodations for students with physical disabilities
- Hiring qualified teachers, instructors and principles based on merit rather than nepotism and connections
- Building new schools, particularly in underserved areas, and providing them with supplies.

Recommendations for addressing education gaps:

Regarding children who are not enrolled in formal education, it is important to utilize various educational methodologies and platforms to serve their needs. Online education would be one approach, but it would require significant training and capacity building, as very few teachers are trained in remote teaching, which requires specific types of equipment, technical capabilities, and other resources.

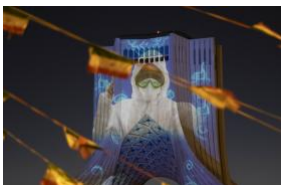
Teaching via YouTube could be another possible solution. This would involve a group of volunteer or paid teachers with support from an institution to help with funding and organization. Teachers would develop educational curricula for various courses and topics starting with basic principles, then upload these curricula to YouTube or a similar digital platform. Similar strategies have been used in some educational settings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the system must shift from a handful of remote platforms developed by certain teachers to a centralized, professionally developed curriculum available to a wide swath of students through a standardized online platform.

Others argue that civil society organizations should play a role in implementing UNICEF’s accelerated learning program, which targets children ages 8 to 15 who have not attended school or learned to read, and children who are returning to school after a gap of at least one year. These children study in special units connected to primary schools, according to their current level. The Ministry of Education has developed a special plan of study for these children that covers grades 1 through 8 in four accelerated levels, so that students can finish the eight years of curriculum in four years by covering a full year of material in one semester. Civil society organizations can reinforce the impacts of the UNICEF program by supporting education at home, so that children can develop basic math and language skills by learning from members of their family. Through training sessions for adult family members, civil society organizations could train individuals on how best to assist children partaking in the UNICEF program.

Developing streamlined curricula for self-study and home study could also be critical for children living in remote areas who have suffered educational losses. This strategy could be attained through research on building vocational training centers and non-formal educational institutions capable of absorbing students of different ages, and establishing programs that account for the varying needs of targeted students. These centers could offer hybrid educational programs, math and language courses, and vocational training. There is also a need for researching models for training centers geared towards students with disabilities and special needs, who constitute a high percentage of the population in northeastern and northwestern Syria. Moreover, relevant actors should work to expand the role of non-formal education to reach sectors of the population who have not had the opportunity to partake in formal education, such as internally displaced women and girls and unemployed youth.

To see these efforts to fruition, there must be a designated centralized civil authority that employs administrative governance to organize these efforts and coordinate education proposals. This authority would coordinate the work of Syrian organizations and institutions with international organizations that can provide technical and material aid for the initiatives. Education at all levels remains a major challenge for Syria. Different groups within Syrian society—wherever they may be—must continue to draw international attention to the dangers that Syrians across the globe are facing: the potential illiteracy of millions of Syrians. ❖

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