

No Schools, No Textbooks and No Teachers

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The conflict has had a brutal impact on local education services.

Every day, early in the morning, Um Juwan walks her teacher son to the bus that carries staff to one of the schools in Qamishli's southern countryside. With a heavy heart she waves goodbye, tormented by the thought of never seeing him again.

All her other children have left Syria to live abroad; Kamal is all she has left.

Teachers travelling to schools in the southern countryside of Qamishli must take a bus each day to access their places of work.

But as soon as the vehicle leaves al-Qamishli it must run a gauntlet of checkpoints run by various militias at which passengers face taunts and arbitrary arrest.

Teachers and university-age students also risk being seized for forced conscription into the armed groups.

Um Abir, a teacher nearing retirement, described how a soldier had stopped her bus and abused its occupants after the driver had failed to halt at an unmanned checkpoint.

The soldier gathered more than 16 ID cards, swearing all the while, and only allowed them to continue their journey after everyone onboard apologised

Um Abir said that the incident made her fear even more for the safety of her her own son-in-law, a teacher who is wanted for compulsory military service.

Shafiq (not his real name), a teacher at a Tal Hamis secondary school, faces the same threat.

"I live in fear everyday," he said. "Every time the bus is ordered to stop I feel I might die. The problem is that nobody knows the age bracket for compulsory military service. Our bus is constantly stopped and we are ordered to get off. Each time we are stopped one of us gets detained randomly. The way they treat us is just appalling. The tragedy is that now even when I'm at home I'm terrified when I hear fast-moving vehicles."

Yara, another teacher, said that she felt constantly intimidated.

"We, as women, cannot go out wearing makeup or even nice clothes. The way [soldiers] look at us and the way they behave make us tremble with fear. A few days ago I nearly passed out after someone approached me and said, 'What is your name, beautiful?' I really think that leaving the country is the best option we have."

Ahmad is another teacher who said that he had come under scrutiny because of his blond hair.

"One day one of the soldiers asked me, 'Is this your natural hair colour; or do you colour it? Then another soldier at the checkpoint said, 'Could he have have had a sex change operation?'"

At that point, Ahmad said, he almost wet himself out of fear.

In an attempt to avoid multiple checkpoints, drivers often take circuitous routes which can add up to 20 kilometres to the journey.

In the past a round-trip to schools in the south would take two hours. Nowadays, it takes more than four-and-a-half hours.

This intimidation of teachers, combined with damaged schools and a general lack of resources, has had a severe impact on local education services.

Secondary school headteacher Abd said, "Since 2013 our schools have been essentially closed. For the past two years we have been trying to re-open these schools but they are either partially damaged or completely unusable. Our schools lack textbooks and other necessary equipment, as well as teachers. They are reluctant to teach at schools in rural areas because they are afraid of being seized, especially in round-ups targeting men in order to draft them into the army.

"Just to give you an example, until the beginning of 2013 our secondary school intake was 700 male and female students in the literary and scientific branches. We used to have more than 21 male and female

teachers. Today, we only have 23 students, one male and two female teachers.”

Even these three were in danger, he continued, as well as all local undergraduates trying to continue their studies.

“Honestly, I am concerned for the safety of these teachers. Every university student, even those who had deferred their studies, is gripped by fear everyday as they commute to the university in al-Hasakah. The problem is that there are many checkpoints manned by various armed groups. Nobody can tell at which checkpoint a university student or a teacher might get detained.”

Anecdotal evidence indicates that some 50 per cent of children in urban areas and 80 per cent in rural areas have dropped out of school over the past three years.

The result was that the educational system had effectively been suspended.

“Imagine, a few days ago we had school exams,” Abd said. “Only 11 students in 10th, 11th and 12th grades sat these exams.”

Schoolchildren feel that their chances of a proper education have been ruined.

Rabi’ah, a 12th grade student, said, “When events started to accelerate in 2012 I was in 9th grade. I passed all my exams despite the fact that I had not been taught most of the subjects. Exams were chaotic and cheating was rife. I then enrolled in the [upper] secondary school here and again was taught nothing. Even painting and physical education classes were not delivered.

“I am now in the 12th grade of my upper secondary education,” Rabi’ah continued. “Just think, when I was in 9th grade I was not taught most of the subjects. I have not received any education in the past two years. I am now a student in the scientific branch. Can you imagine my future? Imagine me becoming a medical doctor.”

Khalid al-Najjar, a local parent, said that the impact to the education system went far beyond material damage.

“The war did destroy schools,” he said. “But what led to the destruction of generations and the country as a whole are corruption, embezzlement and negligence. Imagine, my son only received three out of 21 curriculum textbooks. They claim that the warehouses are empty. But we find private bookshops selling these textbooks for 400 times the actual price tag. There are no schools, no education, no curriculum and no textbooks in the southern countryside. How are we supposed to educate our children? There is no life and no hope. We have lost everything.”

Location: [Syria](#)

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