

Education in Northeast Syria

Education needs and challenges in identified areas of Northeast Syria

1. Crisis overview

Since the start of the war in Syria in 2011, children have been among the most affected populations. In 2013, an estimated 1.3 million children and adolescents were out of school ([UNESCO accessed 26/01/2023](#)). By 2022, around 2.4 million children ages 5–17, or approximately 43% of the about 5.52 million school-age children across Syria, were out of school ([UNICEF accessed 26/01/2023 a](#); [UNICEF accessed DD/MM/202Y](#)). In 2018, a third of those who were in school failed to complete primary school ([UNICEF accessed 26/01/2023 b](#)). In 2022, 45% of school-age children not enrolled in school had never attended school ([STC 2022 a](#)).

For some years during the war, schools remained closed. This means that many young people no longer of school age at present have been unable to complete their studies, which has a long-term impact on their access to income-generating activities and livelihoods ([HuffPost 06/01/2015](#)).

From January–September 2022 alone, there were 33 reported cases of the use of schools and hospitals by the military and six attacks on education personnel throughout Syria ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)). In January 2023, one in three schools was unusable because it was either destroyed or too expensive to repair ([UNICEF 24/01/2021](#)). As at XX, more than 180,000 education staff had left Syria, been killed, or left their jobs ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

In Northeast Syria, the current conflict is compounding the above challenges to education. The existence of different areas of control between government and non-government entities is resulting in the use of different education curricula, with only a few students officially recognised to enter universities ([STC 2022 b](#)). The situation of children living in displacement camps is a particular challenge. The population in Al-Hawl camp, mostly women and children, has considerably increased since 2018 as a result of fighting against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The provision of formal education is lower than in the rest of the governorates ([UNICEF 18/06/2019](#); [Protection Cluster/UNHCR 23/06/2022](#)).

Other constraints, such as regular power failures and a lack of educational materials, prevent parents from sending their children to school and affect the quality of available education ([OCHA 24/07/2022](#)). Although the war has decreased in intensity in some governorates in Northeast Syria, the education sector is still recovering from the multiple disruptions and damage caused by both the war and other crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic ([GCPEA 2022](#)).

[...]

In Northeast Syria, there are currently two main forces holding territorial control of the territory. On the one hand, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), created in 2018 to integrate several regional administrations in northern and eastern Syria, has held territorial control over much of Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor since 2019, when it decreed military victory over the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and ISIL ([AANES accessed 20/02/2023](#); [ECFR accessed 20/02/2023](#)). Generally, the districts under AANES control are those north of the Euphrates River. This means that a large part of Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, and practically all the districts of Al-Hasakeh, are under their

control. The GoS, on the other hand, exercises control through its allies over some areas of southern Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa, as well as small areas of Al-Hasakeh ([Newlines Institute 11/07/2022](#)).

Aside from these two entities, in 2019, Türkiye also launched a military operation called Operation Peace Springs. This operation has allowed some parts of Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh to be under contested control between Turkish forces and the AANES ([ACLED accessed 20/02/2023](#); [MEI 07/12/2022](#)). Military tensions in this area have recently increased, as Türkiye blames the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the military corps of the AANES, for some attacks in their country and has threatened to invade Northeast Syria ([PBS 10/12/2022](#); [MEI 07/12/2022](#)).

Al-Hawl camp is under the control of the AANES ([UN 12/10/2022](#)). The total surface area of the camp is about 3km². It comprises eight 'phases' hosting displaced Iraqi and Syrians and five 'annexes' allocated to third-country nationals. There are no men living in the annexes; most of the population are women and children. The annexes are fenced and constantly guarded by security agents, with movement between different areas not allowed ([STC 27/09/2021](#)). Al-Hawl camp was established during the early 1990s, but since late 2018, following an escalation of violence in eastern Deir-ez-Zor, more than 64,000 people have newly arrived in the camp ([UNICEF 18/06/2019](#); [Protection Cluster/UNHCR 23/06/2022](#)).

[...]

Al-Hawl camp

In 2019, The Washington Post wrote that there were no schools in Al-Hawl ([TWP 19/06/2019](#)). In October 2020, REACH identified 14 educational facilities, but only 40% of children in the camp were enrolled ([REACH 10/2020](#)). In October 2022, there were 15 educational facilities in the camp, all located in the annexes ([REACH 28/09/2022](#)). Although several reports mentioned the existence of schools, a number of these school have been used as shelter for displaced people or are insufficient for the number of children in the camp, which is almost half of the total population ([MSF 12/11/2022](#)).

Deir-ez-Zor

In Deir-ez-Zor, 90% of schools have been reported as functional. Of these, 12% have classrooms that are not fully equipped for teaching purposes, and 3% are partially destroyed. Only 5% of schools have laboratories, and only 9% have school libraries, but none of all these facilities are fully equipped. 9% of schools also do not separate by educational level, and 19.3% of teachers have not graduated from an institution that qualifies them to practice teaching ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

WASH facilities in the schools are insufficient for children's educational needs. 64% of schools have no drinking water available or have less than 3L available per student. 34% of schools have only one toilet available for every 60 or more students. 67% of waste in the governorate is deposited in septic tanks, causing flooding when combined with heavy rainfall. This leads to potential infections and diseases in students and teachers. An estimated 15% of the classrooms in functional schools are overcrowded ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

[...]

Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor have the highest levels of non-attendance in Syria at 24%, 22%, and 19%, respectively. Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates also reported the lowest numbers of children in secondary school at 4% and 7%, respectively ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)). Similarly, just around 36% of

children under five years old have access to early education in XX, making it difficult for them to access primary education later on ([STC 2022 b](#)).

Forced displacement is one of the main drivers of school dropouts. 36% of displaced children are not attending school ([STC 2022 b](#)). When children have been displaced three or more times, they are 20% more likely to be out of school. In the first three years after displacement, children are 42% less likely to attend school ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)).

Ar-Raqqa

Ar-Raqqa has the second highest school non-attendance rate in Syria (22%) ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)). An estimated 64% of children aged 6–18 in the governorate were not enrolled in school in 2022. The main reasons behind this figure are forced displacement, the consideration that schools are not safe for children, and the lack of schools resulting from destruction ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

Students who attend school are also not guaranteed to be attending continuously. The number of children regularly attending school in Ar-Raqqa city dropped from 74% among 6–11-year-olds to 22% among 15–17-year-olds ([REACH 12/12/2022](#)).

Al-Hasakeh

Al-Hasakeh has the highest school non-attendance rate in Syria (24%). In 2022, 56% of children ages 6–18 were not enrolled in school. Among the reasons identified for the dropout of children in this governorate are the lack of physical infrastructure given the destruction of schools, distance to educational facilities, the lack of teachers in the district, and the consideration that schools are still dangerous places ([ACU 08/2022 a](#); [OCHA 22/12/2022](#)).

Al-Hawl camp

Many of the children in Al-Hawl camp have never attended school in their lives or have attended only sporadically ([UNICEF 18/06/2019](#)). The main reasons behind children's non-attendance include the lack of functional schools, bullying and harassment by local children, and language differences ([STC 23/09/2021](#); [KII 02/02/2023](#)).

Deir-ez-Zor

Deir-ez-Zor has the third-highest school non-attendance rate in Syria (19%) ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)). In 2022, 54% of children ages 6–18 in the governorate were not enrolled in school. The main reasons behind dropping out are forced displacement, compulsory recruitment, and the perception that schools remain to be dangerous places ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

2. Limited access to education

A range of mainly protection-related constraints restricts access to education. Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor governorates face widespread contamination from unexploded ordnance, which are often planted along roads and near public infrastructure, such as schools, affecting children's mobility and access to school ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)). During the first ten years of war (2011–2021), landmine explosions killed 605 children in Syria. Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor governorates respectively accounted for 23.7% and 16% of these casualties ([Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor 04/2021](#)).

Among other reasons that parents report for not sending their children to school are air strikes, the fear of kidnapping (mainly among girls), and forced recruitment along the way ([Protection Cluster et al. 07/12/2020; STC 2022 a](#)). Students that have to cross the lines of differently controlled territories to access education and national exams often face violence along the way. Teachers and education providers face harassment, particularly in SDF-controlled areas, mainly in the form of dismissal and the suspension of their work licenses but also through the physical use of force and violence ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)).

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack has identified cases of arrests, threats, and intimidations of students and teachers in Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez-Zor, and Ar-Raqqa governorates. Some students travelling from conflict-affected areas to government-controlled areas have been held and attacked ([GCPEA 2022](#)). Members of armed groups have also beaten and threatened students protesting the military use of educational facilities ([Syria Friends 14/09/2020; GCPEA 2022](#)).

Aside from the access constraints caused by violence, economic factors, such as a lack of money, also pose as barriers for children to attend school. Some families mentioned that they did not have the money for school supplies or transport. Some schools are also far from people's residences, meaning attendance involves either high transport costs or moving closer to the location of the school ([STC 2022 b; ACU 08/2022 a; KII 02/02/2023](#)). Physical barriers to accessing school, combined with the varying availabilities of curricula, have led to 66% of children not wanting to go to school, as they do not perceive it to be useful or adequate ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic also led to the closure of schools, further disrupting children's education ([ACU 09/2021](#)).

Children with health conditions, such as injuries or disabilities, reported lower school attendance (nearly 50% in northern Syria). In the governorates in this area, only 3% of schools are equipped to receive children with disabilities ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)). The lack of staff specialised in education for children with disabilities and of adequate facilities to deal with disabilities prevent these children from being able to stay in school ([STC 2022 b](#)).

Ar-Raqqa

Reasons for children attending school less often include their family's inability to pay for necessary materials or fees (51%), child labour (23%), transportation barriers (17%), and a lack of available schools (15%) ([REACH 12/12/2022](#)). 15% of students in Ar-Raqqa considered it a risk to go on their way to the school. Some of the main risks mentioned by students while going to school were clashes and crossing dangerous forests. 26% of the students in Ar-Raqqa told their teachers they did not feel safe at school. Around 85% of schools in Ar-Raqqa are located more than 500m away from students' homes. Although there is no generally recognised and recommended standard, such a distance can make students in rural areas walk long or take public transportation through inhabited zones, putting them at risk of harassment and other forms of violence ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

Even when educational facilities are well equipped and functional, schools often do not have a sufficient absorption capacity for all students. Aside from the lack of teachers, those available have little in the way of professional development and do not always enough training ([USAID 01/07/2022](#)). In Ar-Raqqa, 61% of schools are only for primary learners, and only 8.1% of these schools include secondary education. This implies limitations for children to continue their studies up to secondary school ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

People from Al-Hawl also said that in Ar-Raqqa, they were stigmatised as members of the ISIS/ISIL, and this can be a barrier to children's access to schools ([Arab News 16/06/2022](#); [KII 13/02/2023](#)).

Al-Hasakeh

The Turkish-initiated attacks from November until 5 December 2022 destroyed the schools of 1,500 students, leaving them without access to education. The attacks affected the villages of al-Bouida, al-Dabib, al-Dardara, al-Sousa, Gozaliya, Makhtala, and Sukar al-Ahimer in the northern region of Al-Hasakeh ([NPA 05/12/2022 and 03/12/2022](#)). Similarly, on 18 August 2022, a Turkish drone-strike hit a rehabilitation/education centre in Shamuka village, Tel Tamer town, which hosted girls who were formerly SDF recruits, killing five people and injuring ten ([OCHA 22/12/2022](#)).

Insecurity in schools was one of the reasons that families cited for not sending their children to school. These attacks risk generating further dropouts in the short term ([STC 2022 b](#)). In Al-Hasakeh, around 69% of schools are located more than 500m away from students' houses. Some of the main risks mentioned by students while going to school were clashes, explosive remnants of war, and passing through checkpoints or military zones ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)). Education in the governorate is often disrupted during times of intercommunal violence or by military operations ([MEI 03/2022](#)). 73% of the schools are only for primary education, and only 7.6% of this percentage include secondary education. This implies limitations for children to continue their studies up to secondary school. 18% of the students in Al-Hasakeh told their teachers they did not feel safe at school ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

Al-Hawl camp

Education provided in Al-Hawl camp tends to be constantly interrupted for security reasons, such as the Turkish drone-strikes on 23 November 2022 that targeted the camp and killed eight guards. As a result, some aid groups intermittently suspended some services in the camp ([Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 24/11/2022](#)). Given incidents of violence in the camp, the authorities have established screening and registration systems that can delay humanitarian assistance. In June 2020 and April 2021, operations to arrest those suspected of violence resulted in more than 5,000 military and security personnel in the camp and the suspension of all humanitarian services, with the exception of life-saving assistance ([STC 23/09/2021](#)).

In Al-Hawl, children have sometimes been singled out in the press as adherents to ISIS/ISIL ideologies, leading to stigmatisation and even putting them at risk of violence in the camp. From January–August 2021 alone, three children were shot to death for these reasons ([STC 27/09/2021](#); [KII 02/02/2023](#)). During military operations in April 2022, one child was killed and more than five were injured in the camp. In 2021, at least two people were killed per week in the camp ([STC 25/04/2022 a](#)).

Deir-ez-Zor

15% of students in Deir-ez-Zor consider that they are at risk on their way to the school. Some of the main risks mentioned by students were clashes, explosive remnants of war, and the crossing of dangerous forests. Around 56% of schools in the governorate are located more than 500m away from students' houses. 35% of the students told their teachers they did not feel safe at school ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)). Some families reported poor infrastructure and a lack of teachers as the reasons behind their children dropping out of school ([NPA 02/03/2022](#)). The ISIS/ISIL takeover also significantly disrupted education in Deir-ez-Zor for several years. Between 2014–2019, most schools were closed and used

as shelters during the war, or those who could access education were taught a new curriculum established by the armed group ([TNH 25/07/2016](#); [Arvisais and Guidère 05/05/2020](#)).

Given the multiple changes in the educational structure, many students have had difficulties in completing their studies. The total or partial destruction of schools, insufficient salaries for teachers, and a lack of school materials limit the capacity of the educational system to accommodate all school-age children or young people who could complete their studies ([JFL 05/2022](#); [ACU 09/2021](#)). In Deir-ez-Zor, 81% of the schools are only for primary education, and only 3.4% of this percentage include secondary education. This implies limitations for children to continue their studies up to secondary school ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

[...]

Winter

During winter, a lack of electricity implies protection challenges for children both in schools and on their way to school. In schools, classrooms without heating can be dangerous for children, as temperatures can drop drastically. On their way to schools, children are at major risk while walking along dark streets, as street illumination depends on electricity. This has led some children to stop going to school during winter ([OCHA 24/07/2022](#)). In Ar-Raqqa, 6% of functional schools need heaters. This number increases to 21% and 27% in Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh, respectively ([ACU 08/2022 a](#)).

Fuel shortages

In 2022, the sharp rise in fuel oil prices led to increasing supply limitations in Syria. Since December 2022, the crisis has deepened, and fuel oil is no longer available even to those who can afford to pay for large quantities ([OCHA 15/01/2023](#)). Among the reasons for this crisis are the sanctions on Syria, which have restricted imports, and the fact that several oil fields are in areas outside government control ([OCHA 15/01/2023](#); [France 24 18/12/2022](#)).

The fuel oil shortage has affected humanitarian provision in a number of ways. As at 30 January 2023, the shortage had cancelled 40% of humanitarian shelter and NFI aid distributions ([OCHA 15/01/2023](#)). During the devastating earthquake on 6 February 2023, rescuers also announced that the lack of fuel oil was likely to affect their ability to continue operating ([ACAPS 07/02/2023](#)).

In the education sector, 30% of teachers in non-formal education projects are unable to reach schools because of the high cost of transportation. 50% of children are unable to reach schools or experience no electricity in their schools ([OCHA 15/01/2023](#)). As power cuts resulting from the lack of fuel oil become more constant, many children are at risk of being unable to carry out their educational activities or of missing school given the lack of light or power for heaters to operate during winter (which lasts until the end of February) ([OCHA 24/07/2022](#); [TWP 20/01/2023](#)). The fuel crisis has also increased the prices of food and other goods and affected Syria's economy ([TWP 20/01/2023](#); [VOA 12/12/2022](#)). As education costs are a major concern for parents, the increased prices of other goods could also affect children's attendance.

[...]