

SAVING SYRIA'S LOST GENERATION THROUGH EDUCATION

Meeting the educational needs of the approximately one million Syrian children of school age in Turkey presents a complex set of challenges for state policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations. However, ensuring access to education is a necessity in order to save Syrian children from becoming a lost generation. In this article, the author analyzes the shortcomings of the options currently available to Syrians – the option to enroll in Turkish state schools or enrolling in Temporary Education Centers (TECs) – as well as lays out policy recommendations for how the system could be improved.

Yasser M. Dallal*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Fall 2016

* Yasser M. Dallal is a Syrian-Turkish engineer and Chairman of the Board of HayatSür Derneği, an NGO supporting Syrians in Turkey.

The war and chaos that has been going on in Syria since 2011 has caused 6.5 million of the total 2011 population of 23 million to relocate within Syria, and six million immigrate to and take refuge in various countries around the world, especially in neighboring countries. According to official statistics, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is close to three million. About one million of them are of school age. Of those refugees, 30 percent are at elementary school level, 30 percent are at middle school level, and 40 percent are at high school level. While education is being discussed, we should not ignore the approximately half a million Syrian babies who were born in Turkey and will start school soon.

Providing education to millions of children who ended up in Turkey as a result of the civil war that has been going on for more than five years with no foreseeable end in sight is crucial to prevent the loss of a generation – or generations. However, there is another dimension to the matter which is just as important as the humanitarian one, and that is security. Education is the only way for these children who escaped from war, took refuge in another country, and experienced violence and significant traumas to make a life for themselves. Providing education is their and our only chance to protect them from being an easy target for criminal organizations and terrorist groups.

Having emphasized the importance of education once again, I intend to share some information about the current status of educational opportunities provided to Syrian refugees that are under the age of 18 living in Turkey, analyze the government's policies, educators, and curriculum, and present proposals that are being studied in order to eliminate these problems.

As I mentioned above, the number of school age Syrian refugees is about one million; however, only half of them currently go to school. 50 percent of elementary school level children do not attend school, 50 percent of those at the middle school level do not attend school, and 75 percent of those at high school level do not attend school. The Syrians who do attend school either go to Turkish state schools, Temporary Education Centers (TECs) for Syrians, or other private Syrian schools. Let us take a look at the current situation in these schools.

Syrian refugees have the right to enroll in and attend Turkish state schools on the condition that they are registered under the Temporary Protection Regulation. The official number of Syrian refugee children that attend Turkish state schools is 325,000. There are various reasons for this low number. The most significant is that only a small portion of the refugees speak Turkish well enough to receive an

education. Another important reason is that Syrian families do not give consent to their children to receive an education in a language and context that they themselves do not understand. Other reasons include the Syrian students' inability to provide documents required for enrollment in Turkish schools, the reactions of Turkish parents, and the difficult position of Turkish school au-

“Providing education to millions of children who ended up in Turkey is crucial to prevent the loss of a generation – or generations.”

thorities who are obliged to enroll these children in lower grades because they have been out of school for a long time and have experienced traumas.

The majority of Syrian refugee children attend Temporary Education Centers (TECs), but these centers will not accept new enrollment for the first grade starting in the 2016-1017 academic year. According to new regulations, enrollment in Turkish state schools is compulsory for children who will start school starting this academic year. Nevertheless, as I explained above, due to many obstacles Syrian children cannot benefit from the opportunity of going to Turkish state schools. As it stands, in cases where they cannot enroll in TECs, it is impossible for some children to attend any type of school.

According to relevant provisions of the Regulation on Preschool and Elementary Education Institutions Affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı – MEB), courses and programs can be organized for the needed subjects – particularly Turkish – outside school hours. For students who have been out of school for a long time, this allows them to keep up with their grade level and not lag behind. Additional course fees for teachers who take part in such activities are being assessed based on the provisions of Article 8 of the Resolution on Course and Additional Course Hours of Teachers and Administrators Affiliated with the MEB.

On the other hand, children who currently attend TECs face other issues with regards to their education. We can group them into three categories: administrative problems, problems related to educators, and problems related to the curriculum.

The lack of administrative centralization, as well as the lack of inspections constitute the biggest problems administratively. Additionally, there is no standardized education system for educators. Another problem faced by students that attend these TECs is related to the certification of education they receive. The certificates given by these schools must be certified by the MEB.

“In order to meet Syrian refugee children’s urgent educational needs, improvements should be made to the quality of the education provided.”

Among the problems related to Syrian educators, two stand out in particular: teachers that are unqualified in terms of experience and skill; and the lack of facilities provided for teachers. Without proper inspections and administrative coordination, a portion of teachers serving in TECs work under false documents and diplomas. Those who have authentic diplomas and educator certificates are not able to obtain certificates of equivalence or verify the authenticity

of their documents. Also, the absence of legislation addressing the qualifications for being accepted into the position has led to the employment of some teachers lacking the professional skill and experience. In order to overcome this important problem, the MEB has initiated vocational training programs for teachers serving in TECs early in this academic year.

Another problem is that teachers serving in TECs do not have work permits or job security. This naturally shakes their confidence in their future and decreases their motivation. The financial reward for this highly demanding occupation is also far from satisfactory. Incentives given by UNICEF (which cannot be given to all teachers, but only 12,600 of them) are low for the minimum standard of living in Turkey, making it impossible for teachers to get by, which is discouraging to say the least. The MEB has announced that improvements will be made on this matter starting in 2017.

When it comes to the curriculum and content of the education provided in these TECs, again we see some very important problems. These education centers use a version of the curriculum used in official Syrian schools, which has been altered with the omission of some sections that are not approved by both the Turkish and the temporary Syrian government, as well as the addition of new sections. This means that the curriculum has a philosophy based on outdated ideas like the single-party state, a weak systematical structure, and unreliable content on subjects such as history and Arabic. Furthermore, there are complications with the provision of educational materials and books.

Although the TECs are scheduled to close in three years, the MEB continues to provide vocational training programs for Syrian teachers, which suggests that official policies aim to provide a special education system for Syrians. Therefore, in order to

meet Syrian refugee children's urgent educational needs, improvements should be made to the quality of the education provided and the educators employed, as well as increased accessibility in order to reach more children. How can this be achieved? I would like to share with you the proposals we have come up with on this matter.

First of all, a high committee or commission must be created which will address the problems faced by Syrians on education, propose decisions or solutions regarding education policy, implement the applicable policies and rules, and be responsible for the education of Syrian refugees. This high committee must include representatives of the Republic of Turkey, the MEB, the Temporary Syrian Government Ministry of Education, and NGOs. This commission must be responsible for the following:

“Provincial education centers must be established in cities where Syrian refugees live.”

- Working towards building a system that controls the education process as a whole: coordination between Syrian administrators, Turkish coordinators and educators, and remaining personnel; and maintaining relationships with the official education center in Turkey;
- Unifying the curricula for the entire academic year, determining the examination dates, the start and end dates of the academic year, and the dates of official holidays;
- Standardizing salaries across all schools based on years of experience, competencies, and administrative positions, and setting them at a level that will allow for an acceptable standard of living;
- Implementing an inspection system to identify false certificates and documents;
- Creating an examination system to determine the educational levels and competencies of educators;
- Training educators, improving their skills, and developing plans to engage them with new technologies;
- Opening schools in every city according to the geographical distribution that will accommodate children who want to go to school, and inspecting and monitoring the education centers;
- Inspecting the curriculum and working towards standardizing the curriculum across schools and institutions, including those where the role of the sponsor

is determined based on administrative responsibilities rather than relevant education.

Second of all, provincial education centers must be established in cities where Syrian refugees live. These provincial education centers must be responsible for the following:

- Managing the inspections of schools in order to monitor the education process;
- Observing and monitoring the performance of educators through education experts;
- Collecting statistics on education centers and creating a database;
- Approving the implementation of the rules directly imposed by the high commission of education;
- Opening craftsmanship and vocational training schools, and enrolling Syrian students in existing schools;
- Teaching Turkish to Syrian educators;
- Preparing special educational programs to allow young Syrians who have graduated from schools to be employed in Turkish schools;
- Organizing language courses, vocational courses, and preparatory classes for Syrians aged 18 years and under;
- Ensuring the enrollment of Syrian children in kindergarten and first grade directly in state schools;
- Expanding the allocation of state incentives to encourage the enrollment of 5th grade students directly in state schools;
- Providing transportation for students and procuring school uniforms;
- Meeting the need for Turkish school books and basic science equipment;
- Frequently organizing activities and programs that will make it easier for Turkish and Syrian students and families to live together in peace (create harmony), and overcome the prejudices between the two societies;
- Carrying out special works and providing counseling services to children who were subjected to war and immigration traumas;

Third, the content and curriculum must be revised.

- A curriculum must be prepared to represent all the peoples of Syria and the ambition of the young generation without clear biases or monopolizing it for a certain community.

- When preparing the curriculum, authorities must not favor any particular group.
- Universal human values and principles must be at the core of education. Teaching respect and tolerance for others' opinions and democracy for children must be among the primary objectives of education.
- The foundation must be laid for education, good manners, virtue, and knowledge.
- The education system must correlate theory with practice.
- The importance of being a good citizen and observing the law must be explained.
- The curriculum must be prepared based on modern standards; curriculum objectives must be aimed at the desired knowledge level; high education goals such as success, university education, and career must be pursued; education must be supported by the most recent research; modern technology must be applied; and modern materials and techniques must be used.

In conclusion, the causes of and solutions for the problems faced in Turkish state schools and TECs have many similarities. Whether they attend state schools or TECs or cannot receive education, providing psychological support and counseling services to Syrian children in their native tongue is currently one of the biggest needs, given the significant traumas and war these children were subjected to.

Activities and programs must be planned to make it easier for refugee children to adapt to the society they live in, prevent discrimination and ostracism towards them, and overcome the possible prejudices between Syrian and Turkish students and their families. Moreover, comprehensive Turkish language education must be provided to these children to enable them to adapt to the society and attend Turkish state schools. Authorities and teachers in state schools must be informed in order to overcome bureaucratic and other barriers they encounter, especially in terms of enrollment and attendance.

In August 2016 the MEB announced:

In-service training will be provided to increase the awareness of teachers, school administrators, and other personnel with regard to: preventing blame, ostracism, and discrimination against Syrian children during their enrollment in schools; orientation to the educational environment if they suffered from physical or psychological trauma due to war; and support will be received

from school guidance and psychological counseling services for this purpose.

The Undersecretary of National Education Yusuf Tekin stated that a very fast decision-making mechanism has been implemented since 2014, and that approximately 1.5 billion dollars have been spent for Syrian students between the years 2014 and 2016, not including the investments that have been made.¹ Civil society organizations and the MEB frequently meet to identify what needs to be done and to coordinate their work. All these statements and efforts are very promising.

Although sufficient progress has not yet been made towards educating refugee children for reasons such as the fact that the gravity of the refugee crisis was not understood in the early years and was considered temporary, this generation is not yet a lost generation. We can provide the education and future they deserve before it is too late.

¹ Ministry of Education of Turkey, "Müsteşar Tekin: Türkiye'de 509 bin Suriyeli öğrenci eğitim alıyor," [Turkish Ministry Undersecretary: 509,000 Syrian students are currently receiving education in Turkey] 11 November 2016, <http://meb.gov.tr/m/haber/12258/tr>