



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

YOUNG AND PROMISING: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NES UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

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0. AUTHORS & METHODS

0.1 AUTHORS

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists, and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

0.2 METHODS

This report was written on the basis of original RIC research, including over two dozen formal and informal interviews with students, professors, and university administrators from Rojava University, Kobane University, and al-Sharq University. Since the RIC is based in the city of Qamishlo, Rojava University has featured heavily in our research. RIC's insights regarding a selection of university classes, which are found at the end of this report, are based entirely on fieldwork at Rojava University. In the course of RIC's research, the team also visited al-Sharq's campus and met with its administration. Due to the threat of impending war in late spring and early summer of 2022, RIC was unable to visit Kobane's campus during most of our research phase for this report. However, the team was able to visit Kobane University and meet its administration in August 2022.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the face of war and regional isolation, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has constructed a network of universities on its territory in order to rival the knowledge-production institutions of the Syrian government. In its stead, it offers a tertiary education system on par with international standards, yet fundamentally influenced by its democratic values.

North and East Syria's (NES) university system aims to provide the region's youth with a better future, both politically and materially, as well as to seek recognition for and export the AANES' political project by building bridges to international educational institutions. While the achievements in the seven years since NES' first university opened its doors are remarkable, NES universities' lack of broad international recognition is a stumbling block to the success of this project. This report is to serve the reader as an introduction to NES' universities, while also highlighting the challenges this system will face in the future.

Four public universities were built in NES since these areas of Syria's north and northeast became self-governing in 2012, of which three remain operational today. Rojava University was established in Qamishlo in 2016. It was the second university of NES after Afrin University, which opened its doors in 2015 and was forced to close following Turkey's invasion of the region in 2018. After Rojava University, two more higher-education institutions were opened in NES: Kobane University was inaugurated in 2017. More recently, in the fall of 2021, al-Sharq University opened in Raqqa.

Prior to 2011, the Kurdish-majority areas of Syria had no public higher-education institutions of their own. Satellite campuses of Deir ez-Zor's al-Furat University (itself only established in 2006) alone were found in the city of He-seke, which is split between Arabs and Kurds. A majority of students in Jazira, Kobane and Afrin visited al-Furat or the University of Aleppo. Others traveled further, to Homs, Latakia or Damascus. Yet for most Kurdish youth, higher education remained out of reach.

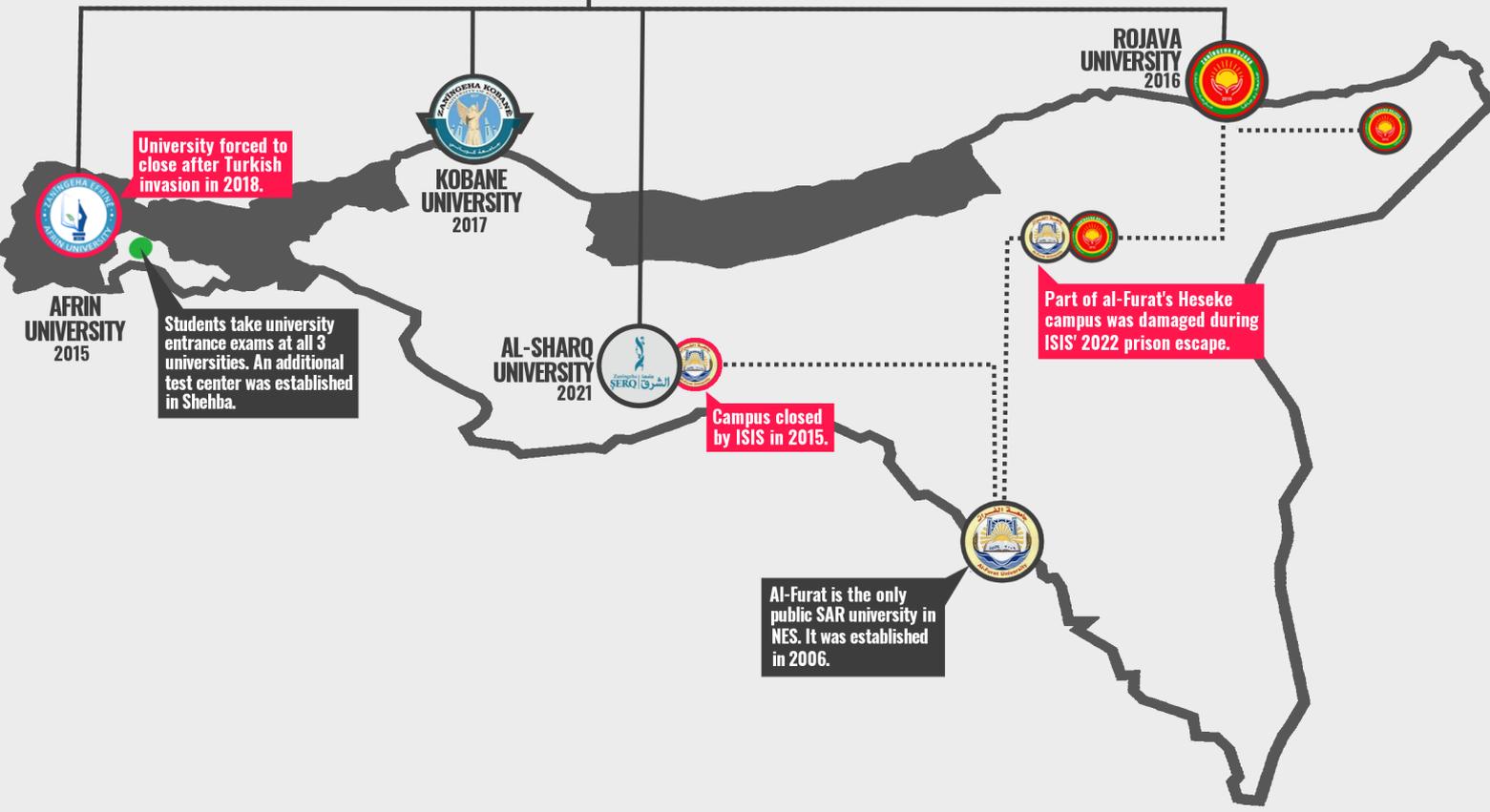
Establishing a native university system in the wake of 2012's 'Rojava Revolution' was meant to break that trend. According to its administration, opening Rojava University had multiple aims. One was to aid local youth in obtaining a tertiary education. Another was to provide job opportunities for local higher-educated

professionals. At the time of the university's foundation, the shadow of war loomed over NES. Roads were blocked at will and access to other universities, such as those in Damascus-controlled (Syrian Arab Republic, SAR) areas, was obstructed. Simultaneously, a high number of local professionals who were educated in SAR universities faced dim job prospects. As educated individuals emigrated abroad, the region faced a debilitating brain drain, which contributed to the existing shortcomings in the scientific field. "The region was not making use of its human capital and it risked not being able to pass on the scientific knowledge earlier generations had amassed in Syrian government institutions or abroad. Establishing a local university sought to solve this crisis," says Dr. Mustafa of Rojava University's foreign relations department, "[it was] a mechanism to transfer this knowledge, as well as for educated individuals to be able to find employment at home."

AANES EDUCATION BOARD



UNIVERSITIES COORDINATION COMMITTEE



AANES university structure as of September 2022.

2. UNIVERSITY PHILOSOPHIES

The university is intended to play an essential role in NES society, as many young graduates who acquired technical and scientific knowledge go on to work with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Rojava University's administration says that it aims for their students to spread the knowledge they gained at their institution among the wider society. The university furthermore distinguishes itself through its philosophy connected to the ideas of the 'Democratic Nation', as expounded by Kurdish philosopher and imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan. According to his writing, within the Democratic Nation, every ethnicity, creed, as well as every city, local, regional and national entity has the right to participate as its own identity in the nation's democratic social structures. "Rojava University considers itself part of these social structures. Thus, knowledge and knowledge-production have to be an organic part of society and should work in service of it, as opposed to an instrument of power and elites," says Dr. Mustafa.

Entrance to Rojava University's main campus in Qamishlo, Spring 2022



For this reason, Rojava University does not only value scientific expertise, but rather focuses on philosophical aspects of education as a core part of its academic quality. For instance, no preference is given to students because of their ethnicity, mother tongue, or religious belief, while every student has the right to study in their preferred language. For now, students at Rojava University are able to study in Kurdish or Arabic, depending on their preference, and “the doors are open for Assyrian friends if they want to open a department of language and literature,” according to the university.

Much like the rest of NES society, the university is organized through councils and committees. Autonomous women’s councils are also present, together with student councils and student representatives from every department, who sit on the councils together with the professors. The Student Councils

manage student affairs. They organise student actions, meetings, hosts discussions, takes suggestions, and organizes celebrations on special occasions. Within each council there are also different committees, such as committees for sport or music. Remedan, one of the Student Council co-chairs at Rojava University in Qamishlo, explains that for every class there are also two co-chairs, who take the criticisms and feedback from the classes and create reports or proposals. Every month the co-chairs of the Student



An erased picture of President Bashar al-Assad above Rojava University's Qamishlo campus betrays the building's former use as the Syrian government's Institute of Agriculture.

Council meet with the co-chairs from each class, to hear how the studies are going, debate important points, and discuss difficulties students are facing. The Student Council then takes the outcomes of these meetings to the university co-chairs. “We think it is necessary to give importance to [students’] role in the decision-making process,” Rojava University external relations responsible Gulistan Sido told the RIC in 2020.

At first glance, Raqqa may seem to have little in common with the Kurdish-majority cities of the Jazira region. It is an overwhelmingly Arab and Sunni Muslim city; it was ISIS' capital just over five years ago. Yet the philosophy of its new university shares more with Qamishlo's than it does with the Syrian government's Furat University, whose former halls al-Sharq now occupies - not to mention ISIS, which sealed off the building to students in 2015. Much like the predominantly-Kurdish northeast, the central government invested little into the higher-education system in Raqqa. Despite being the largest Syrian city east of the Euphrates (population: roughly 220,000 before the civil war), it was home to only a satellite campus of al-Furat and had no domestic university. According to al-Sharq's administration, the university, which officially opened in November of 2021, was established with the help of Raqqa's intellectuals' union, which sought to recover the city's youth from four dark years living in the capital of ISIS' self-styled caliphate. "We are working towards making free people, as free people scare slavery away," says al-Sharq's director Dr. Hasan Alissa. "We want our students to lead their society, because when you change one person it has an impact on their whole surrounding - we are social beings."

To this end, the university has introduced weekly discussions for the university community, in which students are encouraged to speak out. End-of-year student satisfaction surveys were sent out at the conclusion of its first academic year and "will form a core part in how the university's second academic year will be shaped," says Dr. Hasan. Furthermore, the university places a strong emphasis on having their professor "manage" and "guide" their classes, rather than lecture them. The aim is to move away from hierarchical processes of knowledge-production, according to the administration. Al-Sharq, too, has fostered a multi-cultural learning environment, with students of all corners of NES attending the university. Being as it is the only university in an Arab-majority city in NES, most students hail from its Arab regions (Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, and Deir ez-Zor). Yet students from Kurdish-majority Afrin and Kobane have also been attracted by al-Sharq's curriculum. Al-Sharq, just like the other two universities, offers free-of-charge student housing right on campus. According to Dr. Hasan, students from Shehba, Afrin, Kobane, Deir ez-Zor, and even some locals fill its several dozen rooms. Much like in Qamishlo, multi-cultured coexistence is seen as an important aspect the university's project.

3. STUDENT LIFE & THE UNIVERSITY STRUCTURE

2,482 students attended AANES universities in the 2021/2022 academic year. The nascent local higher-education structure in NES is still outshined by the central government system, at least in attendance figures. In the city of Heske alone, over 30,000 students attend the government-run al-Furat University's satellite campuses, according to al-Furat's administration. The Rojava Center for Strategic Studies calculates that there are around 50,000 NES students enrolled in both public and private universities. Nonetheless, enrollment in the AANES' universities is growing exponentially year-on-year. NES' first university, Afrin University, quintupled its student body from 222 in 2015 to 1,200 before it was forced to close due to Turkey's invasion of the region in 2018. Rojava University similarly grew from an initial 252 students in 2016 to 1,800 this year. 700 applicants were admitted this year; last fall, 160 students graduated. Kobane University's student body grew almost eightfold - from a humble 65 in 2017 to 498 for the 2021/2022 academic year. A further 32 students graduated from Kobane University in October 2021.

A Jineoloji class being taught at Rojava University in Spring of 2022.



Al-Sharq University says that only 184 students were accepted out of 600 applicants for its inaugural semester. Though the university offers 500 spots, less than half of them were filled. "We did not find that the other applicants met our criteria," says Dr. Hasan, "we strive for academic excellence." The university has furthermore capped the classroom sizes at 40 students in order to provide them with a better learning experience - "we prioritize quality over quantity," Dr. Hasan tells the RIC. These are no empty words. By the end of al-Sharq's first academic year, some students decried that they had learned more in one year at al-Sharq than a full degree at one of the government's universities. Part of the winning strategy is AANES universities' insistence on class attendance, which - unlike at government universities, where only final exams are mandatory - cannot fall below 80%. (Though this, too, has its drawbacks; see below.)

Already, al-Sharq boasts over departments of Social Sciences, Chemistry, Biology, Education, Computer Science, English Language, and Arabic Literature. More departments are planned in the future. The university also places a great emphasis on its alumni being able to speak English. "The aim is for everybody [at al-Sharq] to be able to speak English in four or five years." To this end, the University's Language Institute also offers extracurricular English - as well as German, French, Arabic and Kurdish - classes, which are free of charge for al-Sharq's students and staff. (The general public pays about 20% of the fees they would pay at private language institutes.)



An ad for English language classes offered at al-Sharq University. Employees of the AANES receive a 10% discount, while children of soldiers fallen in battle only pay half price.

Similarly, Kobane University has established a large portfolio of specialized departments, including a Language and Literature department (both Kurdish and Arabic), as well as departments in Social Sciences, Education, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Medicine. In addition, it has faculties of Geography, and Technology (offering 2-and-a-half-year degrees in both Electrical- and Mechanical Engineering), as well as institutes of English Language, Administration and Law, and a Medical Institute offering courses in Nursing and Anesthesiology. In January 2022, it launched an Institute of Graduate Studies. It offers a Master of Arts in Kurdish Linguistics and Kurdish Literature. 28 students are enrolled in this program.

Rojava University, the largest of the three, has 9 faculties and multiple smaller institutes:

Faculty of Medicine

The Faculty of Medicine was opened in 2017 in Sere Kaniye and was later moved to Qamishlo. It offers a 6-year degree.

Faculty of Engineering

Department of Eco-architecture
Institute of Civil Engineering

The Faculty of Engineering offers a degree in eco-architecture which started in 2019 in Heseke and lasts 5 years.

Faculty of Petrol and Petrochemical Engineering

Petrochemical Engineering
Petroleum Engineering

The Petrol and Petrochemical Engineering Faculty opened in Rimelan in 2016 and offers a 5-year course.

Faculty of Agricultural Engineering

The Agricultural Faculty opened in Qamishlo in 2016; it offers a 5-year course.

Faculty of Educational Science

Department of Mathematics
Department of Physics
Department of Chemistry
Department of Biology
Department of Primary Education
Department of Geography
Department of History

The Educational Sciences Faculty opened in Qamishlo in 2016 and delivers a 4-year course. Constituent departments are Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Biology, Geography, History and Primary Education.

Faculty of Religious Studies

The Faculty of Religious Studies has opened recently and offers a 4-year degree with specializations in Yezidi religion, Christian religion (both in Qamishlo) and Islamic religion (in Heseke).

Faculty of Languages and Social Sciences

Department of Kurdish Literature
 Department of Jineoloji
 Department of Fine Arts
 Department of Translation

The Faculty of Languages and Social Sciences opened in Qamishlo in 2016, offering a 4-year course in Kurdish Literature, Arabic Literature and Fine Arts. A 2.5-year course in Jineoloji (the 'science of women') was added in 2017, and a 2.5-year course in English Translation in 2019.

Faculty of Law

The Faculty of Law offers a 4-year degree in Qamishlo

Faculty of Communication

The Faculty of Communication offers a 3-year degree in Qamishlo.

Institute of Mechatronics

The Institute of Mechatronics offers 2.5-year courses in Informatics, Electronics, Mechanics and Electrical Engineering in Qamishlo.

Institute of Finance and Administration

The Institute of Finance and Administration was established in 2018 and offers a 2.5-year degree in Qamishlo.

High Institute of Social Sciences (Postgraduate)

The High Institute of Social Science has a Master of Social Sciences program. It consists of a 3-year degree.

High Institute of Mechatronics (Postgraduate)

The Higher Mechatronics Institute opened in Qamishlo in 2019/2020 and offers a 3-year course.

Institute of Science and Modern Technology (Postgraduate)

The Institute of Science and Modern Technology (ISMT) has 5 departments: Biotechnology, Crop Agriculture, Petrochemical Engineering, Chemistry, and Mathematics. It offers postgraduate degrees in all departments, including for professors of all three NES universities in these fields. According to the ISMT, they provide "focused support for technical practitioners, specialists and managers in the creative, digital, engineering and science technologies, working across a broad range of sectors [...] in NES and overseas."

NES universities are open to all people living in NES. Would-be students have to apply through the education department and are invited to take a standardized exam based on their highschool grades, which determine which courses are open to them. The entrance exam – which lasts around 3 hours – can be taken at all NES universities, as well as at an additional test center in Shehba, the AANES-controlled exclave north of Aleppo. The exam is either a general science exam or humanities exam, depending on the choices of the applicant. Exam questions are provided in Kurdish and Arabic, and answers in either language are considered. The exam’s results determine whether applicants are accepted to their desired courses. For English Translation, an additional English proficiency examination is necessary. Once a student has been accepted into the NES university system, they can choose freely which of the three universities they want to study at. According to the Universities Coordination Committee, the AANES body which organizes these universities, 2,624 students took entrance exams for the 2021/2022 academic year. This includes 1,640 in Qamishlo, 637 in Kobane, 86 in Shehba, and 261 in Raqqa.

Student housing in Qamishlo, Kobane, and Raqqa is provided free of charge to all student. In Qamishlo, around half a dozen student residence buildings are found across the city; over half of them are for female students. In each residence, 3-8 students share bedrooms and form a ‘commune’, which has to



Students enjoy a coffee at Rojava University's cafeteria.

perform certain collective tasks, such as cleaning communal spaces. Transportation to and from classes is provided by the university free of charge to all students. In Qamishlo, a university bus circuits the city periodically between 7 AM and 3 PM. Most university classes take place in the morning and midday; only rarely do students stay past 3 in the afternoon. Nevertheless, communal spaces are available at the universities and student residences. At Rojava University’s main campus in Qamishlo, students of both sexes spend their breaks at the local canteen, studying, having lively discussions over coffee and snacks, and occasionally playing darts.

4. DEFYING THE ODDS

NES' seven-year-old university system was built in the face of ongoing war and insecurity. Emblematically, the University of Afrin was forced to close following Turkey's invasion of the predominantly Kurdish region in 2018, which displaced between 250,000 and 300,000 people and killed hundreds of civilians. Rojava University absorbed many exiled students, while many of the university's professors found employment with the then recently-established Universities Coordination Committee, whose aim it is to coordinate the region's tertiary educational programs and to develop a common strategy.

Insecurity is the perennial threat to NES' universities. In Qamishlo, English Language professor Heja Ayo (name changed on request) says that during the early years of Rojava University, many of the classes were held to the sound of war jets flying overhead (the university is located next to Qamishlo Airport, now a Russian airbase). The near-constant threat of a Turkish attack has severely held back progress in NES' higher-education institutions. The universities in Kobane and Qamishlo are particularly vulnerable to Turkey's attack, as both campuses sit little over a mile from the Turkish border.

Graduation ceremony at Rojava University in the Fall of 2021.



The war situation has deep implications for the universities' functionality, even when they are not directly under attack. Basic resources, such as electricity or fuel to run generators, are in short supply. "Students and teachers can't work, because the internet is so bad," says professor Ayo, "if we have online classes, we can't do that. But also if we want to research, to do projects, to download books, to contact colleagues or to hold meetings, it is difficult. If we don't have the internet, everything stops."



Afrin University (pictured) was established in 2015 and was forced to close as Turkey invaded the region in 2018. Today the building houses the Afrin Council, a Turkish proxy government in the region.

In 2020, the COVID pandemic forced the universities to adapt once more. Face-to-face lessons had to be canceled on several occasions; online classes were introduced. Yet, unlike their Western counterparts, many university students in NES lack internet access or a computer. In the face of adversity, students at Rojava University recorded lessons and self-organized study groups through social media and messenger services such as WhatsApp and Zoom. "The good relation between students and professors is a strong point of the university," says professor Ayo. "They are a community; they push through hardships together. Even throughout the difficulties of war, the students put in all the effort."

Even basic educational materials are not a given in NES. At Rojava University, staff decries the lack of supplies, particularly Kurdish-language materials. Under Baathist rule, Kurdish (Kurmanji) was not a language of instruction at any educational institution in Syria. Its use was relegated exclusively to the private sphere and thus hardly developed an academic lexicon. The Kurdish language's similar trajectory in Turkey, Iraq and Iran has led to a severe gap in educational material in Kurdish, particularly for tertiary education. At Rojava and Kobane universities, Kurdish has become the language of instruction for a majority of classes, given that both cities are majority-Kurdish. This development has also made it possible for Kurdish professors from Kurdish regions in Turkey, Iraq and Iran to lecture in NES.

Arabic-language textbooks, too, are in short supply. Moreover, all three universities are lacking basic educational materials. Due to - at times - triple embargoes imposed by the Syrian government, Turkey, and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraqi Kurdistan on the region, the universities' administrations have been forced to rely on illicit means to obtain basic supplies. One of the universities told RIC that they had made use of smugglers in order to bring in books and other supplies, yet declined to comment further on the matter for fear of endangering the supply chain of their university. The lifting of US Caesar sanctions in May 2022 for trade with NES offers little respite: the region's three aforementioned neighbors are likely to impede the passage of supplies nonetheless.



Al-Sharq's director, Dr. Hassan Alissa (L), and the university's English Department director (R), inspect al-Sharq's growing library.

5. THE COST OF EDUCATION

NES' university system prides itself in offering free education. Students at all three NES universities pay no fees, while those who come from Turkish-occupied areas - Afrin, Sere Kaniye, and Tel Abyad - are eligible for financial aid. These expenses, as well as professors' salaries, are paid from the universities' budgets. According to each of the universities' administrations, these are \$1,150,000 at Rojava University and \$500,000 at al-Sharq University in 2022. (Kobane University declined to speak on the matter.) Al-Sharq's administration tells RIC that a majority of their 2021/22 budget was provided to them by the AANES (around \$417,000), with the rest coming from local civil society groups. As a share of the AANES' yearly budget of \$981,000,000 (for 2022), its investment into higher education still lags well behind most countries in the world.

A main point of contention is professors' wages, which must remain high in order to attract qualified higher-education professionals. This is especially true in Raqqa, where the choice to lecture at Syrian government or other private universities is more tempting due to the geographical and linguistic

Rojava University's botany laboratory in the Spring of 2022. Importing equipment, such as this microscope, is both difficult and costly to obtain for NES universities.



proximity to the rest of Syria. Al-Sharq, which offers the highest salaries among the three universities, pays professors (in dollars) \$200 (or about SYP 800,000 as of July 2022) a month, on average. "Some professors," Dr. Hasan tells the RIC, "have to be hired privately" for as high as SYP 1,000,000 (or \$250) on top of housing expenses. In a region where the average civil servant salary stands at SYP 300,000 (\$75) in NES and nearly half of that in government-held Syria, such wages can be alluring. Yet the universities' administrations say they need more funding from the AANES. "We want quality professors to come and teach; some of them come from far away," says al-Sharq's Dr. Hasan.



Entrance of al-Sharq University in Raqqa. A student residence building is visible in the background.

However, the main hurdle remains international recognition of students' diplomas. While the quality of the education received at NES' universities in itself is comparable to other institutions' in the region (see below), the lack of recognition abroad may make it impossible for NES' students to continue their studies outside of Syria, find employment abroad, or even have their technical knowledge recognized by companies and institutions not tied to the AANES. "We tell the students: if you want to be rich, this is not the right place for you, you are here for the knowledge, not for the money," Dr. Hasan tells the RIC. Yet material considerations and the possibility to escape poverty are important to a youth brought up in a war-torn region. Mandatory attendance at NES' universities furthermore prevents students from full-time employment during their university years. For these reasons, many university applicants still opt for the government's institutions or, for those able to afford it, private colleges.

The universities' administrations are not blind to students' concerns. In Kobane, the university tells RIC that they explicitly approached schools, the health sector, and the AANES, as well as other institutions, in order to secure employment opportunities for all of their recent 32 graduates. At Rojava University, at least 2 students of each faculty are selected to join the university staff every year. Asked about her greatest wish for NES universities, professor Ayo told RIC, "recognition of course. But I want my students to be successful, to do something for the society, the people, for us. This is my wish."

6. BUILDING BRIDGES

The universities' administrations have put great emphasis on creating links to the outside academic world. The content of its education is NES universities' strongest selling point. Yet outside recognition is crucial if the universities are to be more widely appealing to students. In addition – as is the case with academia across the globe – the quality of the education at these universities will increase exponentially as they connect and engage with other higher-education institutions. Universities seldom flourish in isolation. Moreover, connecting its academics with their peers abroad forms part of the AANES' people- or civil society-based diplomacy. In the absence of formal outside acknowledgment of their diplomas, NES' universities have sought to establish other kinds of relations with higher education institutions internationally.

A first step was organizing joint seminars. For instance, in April 2022, the Jineoloji Department of Rojava University announced a series of virtual seminars in collaboration with Bielefeld University (Germany). Rojava University's English Language Faculty furthermore offers semester-long contracts for foreign English teachers, who can lecture in person or remotely through Zoom.

Students of Rojava University's Mechatronics Department set up light-up displays in downtown Qamishlo as part of an art installation.



Dozens of teachers from all over the world have offered online classes, and at least a handful have come to NES to lecture face-to-face, according to the faculty head. Similar guest lecturer programs are also offered at other departments, though they have yet to be formalized through foreign higher-education institutions. At Kobane, "most" of the lecturers for its Master's degree do so online, according to the university administration.

Currently, Rojava University maintains cooperation agreements with at least eight outside universities: Washington State University (US), the California



Entrance to Kobane University in the Summer of 2022. Beginning in 2023, the university will move to another building, and its former halls will be used to house out-of-town students.

Institute of Integral Studies (US), the University of Applied Sciences at Emden/Leer (Germany), Parma University (Italy), Istituto Kurdo in Rome (Italy), Kurdistan University (Iraqi Kurdistan), Bremen University (Germany), and Lebanese French University (Lebanon). These cooperations include joint lectures and courses, cooperative research, and the establishing of mutual exchange programs. According to its administration, Rojava University is actively seeking to establish further official agreements with other academic institutions abroad. In Kobane, Shervan Muslim, co-chair of the university, told RIC that they have bilateral relations with a number of universities, including in Iraqi Kurdistan, but have "even more relations with professors and doctors from abroad." At al-Sharq, their administration says the University of Malaysia has gotten in touch with their religious institute.

NES universities do not lack international attention. World-renowned philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Noam Chomsky, among others, held online guest lectures at Kobane University and Rojava University, respectively. Yet material support is sparse. This is not for a lack of aspirations; projects for the future abound. All universities plan on expanding their research facilities, such as science labs. There are efforts to publish more Kurdish language textbooks, and to write their own in Arabic at al-Sharq. NES' universities want to establish stable exchange agreements with outside institutions, which should allow students and professors to gain experience abroad, as well as for foreign students and professors to spend accredited semesters at NES' universities.

In order to facilitate this exchange, the Center for Solidarity and Cooperation with Universities in North and East Syria (CSCUNES) was established in November 2021 in collaboration with local universities. CSCUNES, which is based in Paris, France, was founded by a “constitutive assembly of scholars from diverse backgrounds across the globe,” according to its own website. Its self-defined goal is to introduce NES universities to a wider audience, recruit staff for these universities, launch collaborations, facilitate exchanges, and organize joint academic activities.

In March 2022, CSCUNES held its inaugural conference in Paris, which was live-streamed online. The conference was attended by professors from across Europe with sympathies for the democratic project in NES. “There was great interest among my students in listening to and learning more about the ongoing revolution in Rojava,” one attendee, a professor based in Belgium, said at the conference. “The idea that a revolution is actually possible spread from Rojava, and this renders other peoples’ revolutions envisage-able, imaginable, and ultimately practicable.”

In honor of the decennial of the ‘Rojava University’ this summer, CSCUNES ran a ‘summer school’ in June of 2022 in collaboration with Rojava University and the University of Bremen (Germany). The program included closed seminars for MA students at the aforementioned universities, and a series of nine live-streamed public seminars on the Kurdish movement and decolonization.

7. CASE STUDIES

The RIC visited several of Rojava University's departments in early 2022. Brief accounts of a select number of these should contribute towards a better understanding of everyday life at the university. The covered departments are: English Language and Translation, Jineoloji, Science, Mechatronics, and the Social Sciences Institute.

The English Language and the Translation Department

The students at the University of Rojava need a B1 language proficiency certificate in order to graduate with a Bachelor's degree. For Master's students, the requirement is C1. Students are able to take 3 hours of English lesson every week. A Language Center belonging to the university offers English classes to university students after their lectures. Each level of the European Language Level Framework (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1) is completed after 30 hours of teaching.



Rojava University's Library

The Center, as well as the Translation department is staffed by both locals and volunteers. Professor Heja Ayo (name changed on request) organized a network of international volunteer teachers to teach English to Rojava University students. Previously, volunteers would prepare their own classes in accordance with the university's curriculum and lecture online. However, due to the lack of fast internet connections, the university has been forced to change the system. Now, the online instructors are only tasked with conversation practice sessions. Yet, such classes remain exceptionally beneficial for Rojava's students, as they might not otherwise have access to English speakers in their daily lives.

Professor Ayo says that the students main concern is the international recognition of their degree. She maintains that, "if they learn English well enough, there will be no better endorsement than their own skills." Lacking outside recognition, the department instead puts their attention on the language proficiency of their students, especially those enrolled in the Translation Department.

The Jineoloji Department

Jineoloji, the 'science of women' which developed as a key aspect of the Kurdish liberation movement, is an existing department at both Kobane and Rojava universities. As its students point out, Jineoloji is a tool to understand society and its problems by taking into account the historical oppression towards women. Equipping young women with theoretical and practical skills, the Jineoloji department hopes to keep developing NES' 'women's revolution' by providing it with an academic framework.

This particular way of combining the reality of the social revolution with academic theory is attractive to many. Foreign universities, too, have shown an interest in the Jineoloji department. The latter established a cooperation agreement with the Faculty of Social Work and Health at the Emdem-Leer University, which consists of joint online seminars for students at both universities. For instance, last December, a professor of the department gave a seminar on the Jineoloji perspective on the family as a basic social structure, which was attended by both University of Rojava Jineoloji students and students of Emdem-Leer University (who took part via Zoom).

Jineoloji is essential for the university. At an institutional level, it has a main role pointing out how social relations can be more egalitarian. The view of the Jineoloji department is important to help the university, as an institution, to actively fight against sexism and to promote academic opportunities for women in all fields. Students and staff in the department take an active role in this regard. For instance, on November 2020, when, coinciding with the International Day against Violence against Women, the Jineoloji department prepared a protest against gender-based violence. Students of Jineoloji designed and produced a mural with the names and ages of the women and minors killed in the previous 16 months in North and East Syria. The action carried out by the Jineoloji students was part of the joint seminars with the Emdem-Leer University.

Zîlan, a second-year student, would like to become a Jineoloji teacher (Jineoloji is taught as a subject in schools, but adult students can also study it at closed Peoples' Academies) in order to spread this knowledge.

Emine, an alumna who graduated last year, works at the Women's Assembly at Rojava University. The Women's Assembly was established in 2016. It deals with all the decisions and actions regarding the women of the university. All female students, professors and workers are part of it. It ensures that women's autonomous decisions are implemented. The Assembly has two female co-chairs: one is always elected from the Jineoloji department, and one is elected from among the other faculties.

Alongside this, there is the Office for Women. In the Jineoloji Department, professor Rinde explains that: “the work of the two organisations is very similar [but] the council is under the umbrella of the university whilst the Office for Women is slightly separate. However, all projects, initiatives, and problems of women in the university come to this office. It also gives education sessions related to women’s issues. Before the start of every academic year we have a meeting in the Jineoloji Department to discuss how to improve the situation for women in the university, and these discussions affects the work of the office. Often, after students graduate, they come work for us in the office. It is an example for the future.”

In a conversation with RIC, students of Jineoloji point out the importance of having the subject as an academic field. They commented on the situation of women with a historical perspective, “The rights of women vanished. Women couldn’t do anything, neither continue their studies nor have a job. But with the revolution, women advanced, women are the vanguard. Because of that, there is a need for a science,” one of the student says.

The students also said that the main motivation to study this field is to get to investigate their own identities as a women, as individuals and as a social agents. “I can raise my voice now. Before, we thought it was our culture that our fathers and brothers are responsible for us. We thought it had to be like this,” another student tells RIC. “After one studies Jineoloji, one understands better.”

Students express that, by studying the reality and the history of women, they can better understand society as a whole, and therefore see how to continue developing the spirit of the Revolution: “There were changes, not 100%, but we are making efforts to improve. We want to implement our rights. [...] Jineoloji is not only about women. It is about equality, about equality between genders and between all kinds of people.”

The department promotes more than just equality between genders. The building of more egalitarian student-teacher relationships is also prioritised. “It is a new department, but its knowledge is not new. It combines theory with practice. The students can have a say, there is equality,” a student tells us.

The Agricultural Engineering Department

Rojava University has three main laboratories: one botany-oriented; one specializing in biology; and a third one specifically for microbiology. The Department of Agricultural Engineering – which itself is split into four specialties (soil, animal production, crops, & plant protection) - is making the most of them. They use the first lab for germination, and when the seedlings have grown, they plant them in the gardening area. In the second lab (biology), they conduct animal production experiments. For example, eggs from different bird species are placed in an incubator for 20 days until they hatch into chicks. In the third lab, the microbiology one, different microorganisms are cultivated, such as *Trichoderma* fungi, which can be used as biofertilizer; *BT* (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), a microbe that acts as a natural pesticide; and *Beauveria bassiana*, a fungi that acts as a biological insecticide.

The soil of the Qamishlo campus' gardening area is open for the students to experiment and conduct their own research. The fourth-year agricultural engineering students do their research in the main greenhouse. Here, they can experiment with food production. For instance, they have produced oyster mushrooms.



Rojava University's greenhouse, located on the Qamishlo campus.

The Department has a partnership with the initiative Keziyen Kesk (Green Braids), which is involved in planting projects and building a network with other educational institutions to whom they donate the plants they acquire.

The Agricultural Engineering Department, too, wants to build bridges to the outside. The department's co-chairs Dr. Lina and Dr. Muneer told RIC that they are actively looking for partnerships with other institutions specialized in agriculture. They expect to get more lab equipment with the help and cooperation of universities and research institutions from abroad. They need an upgraded incubator to keep improving their teaching and their research.

The Department used to buy materials and organic matter from other parts of Syria, though they are shifting towards teaching their students how to grow the latter on campus. Nevertheless, more provisions of fungi

and quality seeds are needed to develop their curriculum. The department also wants to expand the existing greenhouse in order to be able to conduct further research.



Furthermore, the compost system needs to be improved. For now, only an animal compost exists; they need more equipment and help from other institutions in order to improve and expand it.

The lab at Rojava University's Agricultural Engineering Department being shown to visitors.

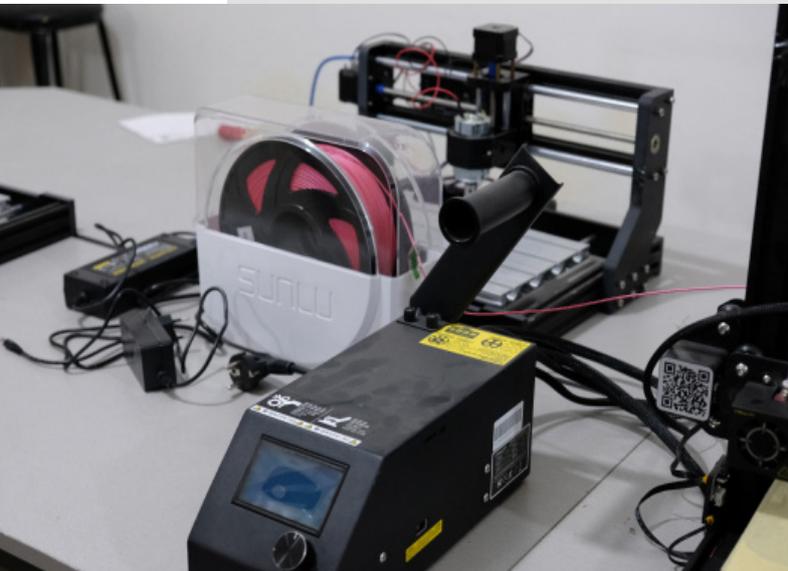
In a region deemed the 'bread basket' of the country, which experiences water-shortages, desertification, and a lack of quality seeds on a regular basis, expanding the Agricultural Engineering Department could be critical step in order for NES to become self-sufficient.

The Mechatronics Department

In the basement of one of the buildings of Rojava University's main campus lies a hidden treasure: the Mechatronics Department. 'Mechatronics' is an inter-disciplinary field that lies at the intersection of mechanics, electronics, and computer systems, and focuses on simple solutions and every-day utility. The Department's workshops consist of hands-on lectures, where students design and build electronic devices along with their professors.

Professors Basil and Siham showed RIC different projects designed by third-years students: A firefighting car containing built-in sensors that are able to detect fire; a small scale 'smart house' controlled from a mobile phone app; and, probably the most attention-attracting project:

a robot spider which contains a single-board micro-controller with programmable code that instructs the robot spider how to walk. The legs of the spider were also designed and 3D-printed in the department workshop.



3D printer at the Rojava University Mechatronics department.

The Mechatronics professors have high aspirations for their department. "We want to develop the existing talent," says professor Basil. "We have always had to bring electronic devices from outside," adds professor Siham, talking about the

ongoing war and embargoes, "but if we make them here, there will be no need to be dependent on the outside." The Department has basic materials at their disposal. However, even those were acquired at high cost (from Damascus), and the professors want to raise awareness about how important it is to find a way to sustainably bring in supplies, in order to keep developing the Department. Of course, like other departments at Rojava University, they are open to collaborations with institutions abroad.

However, aspirations for autonomy go beyond the material. Closely mirroring the values of autonomy of the AANES system and the university, the professors stress the need to be able to develop their own technological systems, free of outside influence. While RIC visited their basement, the professors were engrossed in a discussion about the use of ready-made single-board microcontrollers, and the better alternative of using un-programmed microcontrollers, programming them at the Mechatronics Department, and using them for their own purposes.



Final projects of 2022's Mechatronics students, including a fire-fighting robot, spider robots, and a drone.

For the time being, the Department uses relatively uncomplicated, open-source systems, including Arduino micro-controllers, Raspberry Pi computers and ATmega programmable microchips. These may be called 'intermediate technologies', rather than 'high-tech'. Their relatively low cost and low complexity mean that they enable small-scale automation processes through a bottom-up approach in local and regional workshops and factories.

Social Sciences Institute

The Higher Institute of Social Sciences was born with a clear mandate to establish a bridge between the university and international scholarship, while developing Rojava University's own Social Sciences Institute. Launched in 2020 with the help of Toronto-based academics, its lecturing staff consists mainly of instructors from abroad who conduct their lectures remotely. 12 students, who are being trained to become future instructors for the Institute, attend their online lessons in Rojava University's David Graeber Hall, named after the late anthropologist and anarchist activist who visited the university in 2019. The academic advisory board, too, "is comprised of many well-known academics who support Rojava University," according to the Institute's director, Sardar Saadi. The Institute also forms part of the UK-based Peace with Justice Network. Furthermore, researchers and professors from other universities in Europe have collaborated with local institutions (from universities such as Humboldt University, the Catholic University of Louvain, or the Paris 8 University). For students of Rojava's Social Science Institute, this has meant that they are able to attend seminars and lectures of similar quality to that of their peers' in Europe.

Yasin Sunca, PhD, a university professor in Europe, tailored a module called 'World System' for Rojava University students. According to Sunca, the module discusses the "emergence and transformation of the current capitalist/colonial world system and its internally-structuring mechanisms and institutions such as the nation-state, surplus flow, core-periphery structure, anti-systemic movements, & revolutions." The visiting lecturer told RIC that he usually customizes the topic of his seminars to the context of the students, and that this is also the case for the seminar he is holding for Rojava University students, who can extract their own conclusions in accordance with the context of North and East Syria. The language of discussion is Kurdish (Kurmanji), which Sunca also speaks. The students gather in the main hall of the Institute in order to attend his lectures via Zoom. "These are obviously not ideal conditions, given the fact that it limits interpersonal exchange that you would normally have in classroom," says Sunca. "Nonetheless, globalization benefits revolutionary universities, too."

The Social Sciences Institute also collaborates with Bremen University (Germany). Students of both universities share seminars, where they have joint presentations and discussions. A collaborative Master's course with an MA program in Anthropology at the Humboldt University is also available to Rojava students.

8. CONCLUSION

The reasons for establishing Rojava University, along with Kobane University and al-Sharq University, were multiple. NES' universities are meant to serve as a training ground for a new generation of educated professionals, as a pool for future AANES staff, as a weapon with which to revolutionize education, as a way to lift society out of poverty, as a friendly face for the region's civil diplomacy, and as tool to cement and proliferate the values of autonomy and democracy among NES society. The measure of success of this nascent university system varies depending on the markers one considers.

By all accounts, the universities offer a quality education. For many fields – such as eco-agriculture, petrol and petro-chemical engineering, or mechatronics – the knowledge transmitted to students can have a crucial and immediate impact on NES' ability to develop its society and economy from within. Yet other degrees will not be worth the paper they are printed on without international recognition. For the AANES, building specific and long-term transnational relationships with outside universities, in order for NES degrees to be accredited abroad, is of the utmost importance if the project is to succeed. NES universities have already received much international attention; it is crucial that this vocal support be turned into something tangible.

Students walk the halls of Rojava University's Qamishlo campus in the Spring of 2022.



Of equal or even greater importance for NES' young university system is to be able to mature without the perpetual threat of war. In its brief history, one of NES' universities has already had to close down as a result of war; the government's al-Furat University has also experienced the loss of one of their Heseke campuses due to January 2022's ISIS attack on the city. As mentioned, both the Rojava and Kobane main campuses would have to close if a Turkish invasion across the border would take place. The mere threat of such an attack has stymied development.

With around 200 graduates from AANES universities having only just joined the domestic workforce in the past two years, the university system has yet to have a noticeable impact on NES society. The size of overall student body remains overshadowed by that of the central government's universities', as well as by that of private colleges. Yet the number of students at NES universities is growing exponentially. The opening of al-Sharq University in 2021 is a sign that the AANES remains committed to invest further into higher education. Both the Rojava and Kobane universities will expand their campuses for the 2022/23 academic year - Kobane's new halls will be able to fit 1,500 students - as well as adding multiple new faculties. Nevertheless, all universities need more funding. A common theme across Rojava, Kobane, and al-Sharq is the abundance of ideas for future projects by staff and students - and the lack of materials to realize them.

Finally, NES' university administrations are forced to walk a tightrope between idealism and realism. The universities' autonomy from central government control, and their insistence on incorporating the values of the 'Rojava Revolution' into every facet of teaching have made them important centers for alternative knowledge-production. This in itself should be celebrated as a major achievement. Yet ideology alone will not be enough to attract a majority of college-aged Syrians. Most youth attending university do so in the hope for a better future. The onus remains on the universities to bridge the divide between both interests - without losing the focus on either.

**ROJAVA INFORMATION CENTER
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