

## **Voices from Makhmour: Educational Experiences and Future Reflections in a Kurdish Refugee Camp**

Let me tell you about Makhmour, a Kurdish refugee camp with 12 000 people who are close to my heart both academically and personally.

Imagine a desert, with deadly scorpions and snakes crawling around, burning sun and ice-cold nights. This reality met Kurdish refugees from North Kurdistan (Southeast Turkey), when Saddam Hussein in the early 1990s led them to what can only be described as a graveyard. The Kurdish people have hundreds of years of experience of resistance to oppression, forced assimilation and expulsion. The refugees had fled across the border after the Turkish army adopted the policy of so-called ‘direct mass extermination’. The inhabitants lost everything: villages, homes, livestock and assets, family members, neighbours, and friends. What was their crime? Well, simply refusing becoming village guards, which would mean betraying the PKK whom they regarded as their legitimate protection. Not the PKK but Turkey's historic policy of extermination of the Kurds is to blame for the creation of the camp. The story does not end there – it is a fact that Turkey continues to attack the Kurds – and the camp.

In 2015, Makhmour was attacked by ISIS an army of savages supported by Turkey. The camp was evacuated. Kurdish families outside the camp opened their houses to the refugees. This who were not so lucky slept under the open – in parks or on benches whatever shelter they could find. But those who remained in the camp succeeded in protecting it with the backing of the PKK. ISIS had to give up and withdraw. At the beginning of June President Erdogan carried out his announced drone attack on Makhmour. The drone hit near a playground resulting in the death of three people. In an interview with the state-run TRT News channel, Erdogan said when referring to the camp that “*If the United Nations does not clean it up, we will do it as a UN member*” (2 June 2021).<sup>1</sup> The question is - how can the UN tolerate being reprimanded and accept that Turkey in the next direct a deadly attack on a refugee camp they themselves claims to assist - albeit only cosmetically? But does the UN really support the camp? UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) makes a huge number of having registered all Makhmour refugees providing them with identity cards which makes it easier for them to get work and to travel outside the camp – and for young people to travel abroad to

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters June 2, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-turkey-could-target-refugee-camp-deep-inside-iraq-2021-06-02/>

study.<sup>2</sup> This looks great on paper but is far from what Makhmour residents experience. People are stuck in the camp and can work and stay outside camp only to a limited degree. Students who have managed to get enrolled in a university outside the camp receive no help whether from Kurdistan Regional Government or the High Commissioner for Refugees. They manage to complete only by huge personal efforts and only with the help of fellow refugee students.

I have visited the camp on three occasions (2006, 2010, 2015) to do field work. The goal was to talk to young people about schooling, education, and prospects for the future. Their voices that we rarely hear represent the “tomorrow” of the Kurdish struggle. What I experienced was that Kurdish youth in Makhmour contribute and participate, they support each other and their community in every possible way. This is also how they cope and sometimes succeed. They are ambitious on behalf of the Kurdish people and the one they see as their leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Most of them work extremely hard to get an education when trying to balance past, present and future perspectives, mirroring hopes, desires and beliefs all expressed in a language of hope (McLaren & Leonard, 2002, p. 3). They often say that “... my parents did not learn to read and write, they gave me the opportunity to study in Kurdish in the camp, I will pay them - and other parents back by getting an education”. Getting an education is regarded as a tool to strike back at the oppressive education system in Turkey, that denied them an education in their own language.

The journalist Amberin Zaman states in Al-Monitor 2 June 2021 after Turkey’s drone attack that “*Children are indoctrinated with PKK ideology at schools in Makhmour*”<sup>3</sup> This is not true. The reality of the young generation in Makhmour, and their families’ previous experiences with oppression, displacement, war, violence, and political conflict in Turkey, go far beyond our imaginations. The struggle for survival applies to both the parent generation and the children. When Zaman sees indoctrination or brain washing, I met children and youth who were eager to educate themselves - who resist and seek meaning in an apparently meaningless situation.

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<sup>2</sup> UNHCR July 4, 2011. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2011/7/4e11ae916/refugees-iraq-camp-enjoy-services-rights-registration.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/06/erdogan-threatens-strike-refugee-camp-inside-iraq#ixzz6xDIQOtT>

Despite all the horror they these refugees have faced in the past and the hardship they experience in the present they still refuse to bow for the Turkish state. Instead, they have built up a new society, organized neighborhood assemblies and workers' co-operatives. Deprived of schooling, building schools became a priority for the residents. One male student who later became a dentist described how children and youth carried stone by stone until the hands bled hands, to build the first school. They accepted hunger and blood toil but claimed freedom. About 12 000 individuals, women, men, and children joined hands and started to build a viable society in Makhmour, with an impenetrable collective will fuelled by political visions. It was a mobilisation of *collective* subjects (Casey, 1996, p. 222), longing for changes (SPN, 2005, p. 353). Unique institutions have grown in Makhmour, founded on the ideas of Democratic Autonomy, self-government structures and direct bottom-up-democracy. The refugees established schools, academies, civic and political institutions, Women Council, and a People's Council the highest body where the representatives form a committee representing every 'section' in the camp. Slowly "a new normal" was created in the camp (Jennings 2007).

Since the 1990s Makhmour has undergone enormous changes. Today, Makhmour is a green, quite fruitful village, with bakery, shops, cafes, tailor, hairdresser, weavers, art gallery, nursery, schools, libraries, academies, assemblies, various associations, and organisations, like the youth centre, city council, jail. Women have a special place and, all with a strong emphasis on women. However, there are also parks, flowering gardens with vegetables just to mention some. Much of the thinking and structure of the camp is about strengthening women's independent, emancipated individuals.

In Makhmour Democratic Autonomy is no longer regarded as a model or a project. It has become the shining example of lived democracy and a model that Rojava should later adopt and develop further. As AFN News puts it: "*Maxmur is (...) the 'mother' of the Democratic Autonomy model put in practice*" (26 October 2018). A new generation has grown up in this strategically forgotten camp, which during the years, as mentioned above, has received a minimum of support from UN, international NGOs, and aid organizations like UNICEF.

Many of the refugees who settled in Makhmour in the 1990s had limited school background – many women had never attended school. The illiteracy rate is still today high in the Kurdish regions because of educational exclusion. It would be too extensive here to describe the Turkish educational policy towards the Kurds in the southeast, however, the crucial point is

that the lack of relevant education is still catastrophic for Kurdish identity, upbringing, culture, and educational and political rights.

Each society has its treasured stock of stories. The stories the Makhmour-students bring into the classroom often reflect the ethos and spirit of the community and its collective memory, the structured silences, which make up its repressed past (Giroux, 1985, p. xxiii). The parents' sufferings have become their children's power, and with language as the strongest tool. By enrolling in school and later perhaps higher education, they resembled the oppression imposed on them. One of the female students I met said:

Our parents did not have the opportunity to get an education. Because of the system, they were kept away from education. Most of the parents could not even write their names. All this changed when we came to Maxmur. Today my mother also goes to school and learn in her own language (I-F3).

In Makhmour, education is a political enterprise entailing transformative processes. This has nothing to do with indoctrination as Zaman claims. Today, hundreds of students attend secondary school in Makhmour, and in addition comes kindergarten, primary school and not to forget, adult education. If students get good grades in upper secondary school, they may be enrolled at certain universities in KRG, outside the camp. A characteristic for the Makhmour community is that benefits and knowledge must be shared. The narratives of the youth express how people share everything – also knowledge and practical and logistical issues linked to education. When students are enrolled in universities, they must translate every book from Arabic or Sorani to Kurmanji. The next student then inherits the translated book. There is no spare time, no possibility to live what we usually associate with a student's life. These incredible efforts by the students presuppose a deep will and sense of belonging, friendship, and respect to their people. It clearly shows that education in Makhmour is more than formal knowledge; it implies a process of cultural and moral creation and transformation, which reaches beyond personal aspirations.

By becoming aware of one's oppressed history, democratic rights, being better equipped to participate in democratic life, and with the ability to read political situations, can be termed *political literacy* (Crick, 1998, p. 3). This is what the children and youth in Makhmour is raised and educated for - a process that goes hand in hand with learning how to read and write. By learning to read and write enables them also to read the world and the political landscape. Education, and political literacy, are essential elements in the upbringing of the children in Makhmour and crucial to break the silence and make people aware of their

conditions and democratic rights (Bee, 1981, p. 42). This has enabled the young generation to look at the political situation in all Kurdish parts, from a different perspective, also in terms of participation in the rebuilding of a society torned asunder by war and political conflict.

This is democratic education – not brain washing. Democratic Autonomy could have been just another alternative society model with no relevance for people’s daily lives. However, it offers exactly the opposite. It is unique because it affects all vital parts of people’s daily lives in the communities wherein, they live. Democratic Autonomy is not only a vision; it must be lived and strived for in every aspect of it.

History consists of unrealized dreams and hopes, and these dreams can still be regarded as opportunities for future action. What could have been (history) may still be (in the future). For future generations, history, hope, and future dreams are important (Kellner, 1998). The young people in Makhmour engage in creative lived practices within a democratic autonomy that can contribute to producing a better world they can feel at home in and in which human dreams and potential can be realized. The motivation and courage they show gives hope for the future and how we envision it as a *lived* democratic autonomy. I asked a female student of 18 if she and youth in Makhmour in general wanted to leave the camp, whether they envied Western youth for having more possibilities, more freedom, more money, more fun. She answered:

Either we leave together, or we stay here until our leader is free and as long as the occupation of Kurdistan persists. We envy no one. We will return to our homes together in freedom and take with us the best from Makhmour.

This is the generation of Kurds that Erdogan can never crush. They have a conviction, a fighting spirit, and democratic basic view that cannot be broken down neither through Turkish propaganda nor with weapons. Although Erdogan's real intention is to exterminate the Kurds under the pretext of ending the PKK once and for all, he has also suffered many defeats in clashes with the guerrillas and will probably face problems again. It is therefore highly unclear whether Erdogan will act on his threats to finish off Makhmour, even if he claims that the camp serves as a recreation center and place for wounded PKK fighters.

Why does President Erdogan and his AKP-MHP government fear Makhmour?

It is the very mindset they fear. The fact that the Kurds are increasingly showing their independence and autonomy through democratic self-government, by women liberating themselves and becoming personally and financially independent individuals on an equal footing with men, that diversity at all levels is welcomed. Makhmour represent is the beacon

for these values and sheds light on the initiatives to which the Kurds place their hope for the future. What could be more dangerous than that?

It is incomprehensible that neither the EU, the UN nor NATO are reacting to Turkey's bloody Kurdish campaign in Rojava – North- East Syria, North Kurdistan and now in the Kurdistan Region - Iraq. The UN reacted strongly to Israel's bombing of Gaza, calling it a war crime. Why are they unwilling to look at Turkey's atrocities in the same way? Why does NATO allow a member state to conduct acts of war in another sovereign state as currently in Kurdistan Region-Iraq? An important issue at the recent NATO meeting is the climate crisis. A predictable climate is crucial for NATO in the future because it will affect military planning, choice of weapons, and strategy. Right now, Turkey is burning, poisoning, and destroying large valuable mountain and nature areas in the fight to break the PKK and expel the population in the Kurdish inhabited areas of northern Iraq. But this is probably *not* on NATO's agenda.

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