

Teachers' Strike in Deir Ezzor

Reasons and Recommendations

A special report on the reality of education and teacher strike in Autonomous Administration-controlled areas in Deir Ezzor



Justice for Life Organization©

May 2022

With Support of the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders



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المؤسسة الأورو-متوسطية لدعم المدافعين عن حقوق الإنسان
Fondation euro-méditerranéenne de soutien aux défenseurs des droits de l'Homme

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The views expressed in this study do not necessarily reflect the view of the the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
METHODOLOGY	5
FIRST: THE APPROACH OF EDUCATION IN DEIR EZZOR AND THE STANCE TOWARDS IT	6
SECOND: TEACHERS' STRIKE IN DEIR EZZOR	10
STRIKERS' DEMANDS.....	10
THIRD: ADAPTATION OF STUDENTS' PARENTS TO THE EDUCATION CRISIS	13
FOURTH: CONCLUSION	15
FIFTH: RECOMMENDATIONS	16
RECOMMENDATIONS OF STUDENTS' PARENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS WORKING IN DEIR EZZOR:	16
JFL RECOMMENDATIONS.....	17
<i>The Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration</i>	18
<i>The Autonomous Administration</i>	18
<i>Civil Society Organizations</i>	19
<i>The Autonomous Administration and Civil Society Organizations</i>	19

INTRODUCTION

Education¹ has been a crisis sector since the beginning of the war in eastern Syria/Deir Ezzor in 2012, with most schools suspended from work and thousands of teachers displaced. Teachers were arrested, kidnapped, and dismissed for their political views. When ISIS took over in 2014, schools were completely closed. Students in ISIS-controlled areas in Deir Ezzor were denied from completing education at public schools in the city, which was previously under government control. After the SDF entered the areas of the northern Euphrates River, the expulsion of ISIS, and the restoration of the southern bank by government forces, education has returned, especially in areas recaptured by the government with many challenges. While in the Autonomous Administration/SDF areas, an education committee has been formed to oversee the educational process. The Autonomous Administration and civil society organizations have rehabilitated some schools.

The total number of schools in the Autonomous Administration areas of Deir Ezzor reached 678 primary and middle school schools² and the number of teachers in those areas is 8,663, and the number of students³ is 302,105.

Since then, there have been many difficulties for students to complete their education. And because of that, teachers in Deir Ezzor staged a strike at the

¹ Education From a Means of Conflict to a Vehicle of Peace and Communal Living - JFL - July 2020.

<https://bit.ly/3FE6v51>

² There are no secondary or vocational schools because no students are completing their secondary education in the Autonomous Administration schools because only the certificates recognized are issued by the Syrian government

³ The figures mentioned are quoted from the Co-chair of the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor.

beginning of March 2022, demanding better educational realities, higher monthly wages, and protection of schools.

This report covers the strike of teachers in the Autonomous Administration areas of Deir Ezzor, the reality of the educational process, and the adaptation of student families to the current situation. The report concluded that the parties to the conflict in Deir Ezzor, the Syrian Government and the Autonomous Administration, are responsible for the deterioration of educational realities and that education in the areas of the Autonomous Administration is not met with minimum conditions to provide an appropriate and non-discriminatory educational environment, and that both parties to the conflict, despite their communication at the political, military and security levels, they do not invest in this communication in favor of developing education, stopping school dropouts, and facilitating students' access to appropriate schools.

The report contains several recommendations addressed to both the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration, including joint recommendations of the two parties and other recommendations of civil society organizations working in the governorate and specializing in supporting the education sector among the most prominent recommendations addressed to the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration jointly is that students in the northern Euphrates River, the Autonomous Administration areas, should facilitate access to public schools by allocating water and land crossings and not imposing payments on students by military checkpoints in the control areas, and completely stop threatening students or their relatives of arrest, kidnapped or conscripted.

METHODOLOGY

The report is based on 20 testimonies in three towns under the control of the Autonomous Administration/SDF: Al-Kasra, west of Deir Ezzor, Hajin to the east, and Al-Busayrah in the north of the governorate. Working on the report, including preparing the report's structure and questions, conducting interviews, transcribing information, writing, translating, and designing, took a month and a half, starting from March 25, 2022, until May 10, 2022.

JFL targeted 5 categories to collect accurate numbers and diverse stances on educational reality and teacher strikes. The categories are: Male and female teachers, and two subgroups were targeted. The first is a participant in the strike, and the other is not a participant. The total number of interviews reached 11 interviews; 4 interviews with students' parents, 4 interviews with civil society organizations, and an interview with an official of the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor.

JFL researchers have reviewed previous reports on education in northeast Syria along with related international agreements.

Excluding one interview conducted through WhatsApp, 19 interviews were conducted directly by JFL Researchers. Three researchers in the mentioned regions conducted the interviews. JFL provided training to the researchers on interviewing and the principles of documenting human rights violations.

FIRST: THE APPROACH OF EDUCATION IN DEIR EZZOR AND THE STANCE TOWARDS IT

In Deir Ezzor, the Autonomous Administration has not shown a consistent approach to developing the educational process⁴. The Autonomous Administration adopts several curriculums for the three stages of schooling. The Autonomous Administration has shown no interest in absorbing the growing number of students, neither the restoration of schools, the staff's capacity building, the required raising of financial allocations, and coordinating a partnership with civil society organizations.

Teachers, students' parents, and staff from education-based institutions spoke about the educational process, the educational oversight, the recruitment process, the stance towards curriculums, the salaries of educational staff, and the services provided to schools by the official institution and nongovernmental organizations.

1. Recruitment of Teachers and Educational Oversight

"There is resentment by the education staff in Hajin region about the educational process. That is due to the marginalization of the teacher and the lack of involvement in developing a new educational process," said Ahmed

⁴ 5 Syrian Organizations Submit a Complaint to UN Bodies Regarding Internally Displaced People in Syria - STJ - March 2022.

<https://bit.ly/3PfGjBY>

Hussein Al-Shibli, co-chair of the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor. The co-chair of the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor, Mrs. Amina Al-Saleh, said: "There is an administrative failure. for example, there is no monitoring of the educational process to monitor its failure and success, and there is no evaluation of teachers' performance, and there is no response to complaints submitted." According to a teacher in Hajin, told JFL: "There is no equality in the recruitment of teachers or in the salaries they receive. A teacher with a university degree receives a monthly salary close to that of another school employee who has neither the experience nor the educational attainment". The teacher adds: "Clan relations and special interests interfere in the recruitment of teachers, which makes the competent people no more than 30%". The co-chair of the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor region said about the recruitment process: "At the beginning of the creation of the Education Committee, the appointment was random without following formal procedures, and most of the appointees were without experience and sometimes without certificates. Experienced teachers did not apply to work in schools supervised by the administration because of fear of the return of government forces to control the Autonomous Administration areas in Deir Ezzor, or the possibility of returning to their areas of residence and work in areas under the control of the Syrian government. Over time, the situation has clearly changed, and we are noticing a demand for work in the Administration schools.

2. Curricula in the Autonomous Administration Schools

"The curriculum put forward by the Administration was not acceptable at all because it does not serve the educational process and contradicts many local traditions, which have been replaced by curricula developed under the supervision of UNICEF, which rely on self-learning," said Mr. Al-Shibli, head of the education complex in Hajin region. Mrs. Amina Al-Saleh added: "We adopt the

curricula of the Syrian government for the elementary and secondary stages in order to obtain the recognized certificate". Mrs. Noor Ibrahim Al-Hassan, a teacher at Al-Kasra Educational Complex, said: "The curriculum is good in general, but there is a focus on materials at the expense of others, such as religious education." This was confirmed by Mr. Eid Aweed Al-Mutlaq, a teacher in the educational complex in Hajin: " The UNICEF curriculum is acceptable in such exceptional cases as the region is going through. Its information is intensive but not of a great benefit, especially for the first grade". Mr. Maher Al-Matar, Director of Qirqisia School in the town of Al-Busayrah: "The curriculum is scientifically weak and neglects in teaching Arabic, history and Islamic education and is not appropriate for the child's age".

3. Monthly Salaries for Teachers

The monthly salaries allocated by the Autonomous Administration to teachers are not enough, except for schools funded by non-governmental organizations, where teachers' salaries are higher than those working with the Autonomous Administration. According to Ahmed Al-Shibli: "The salary is not enough and that actually threatens the educational process, as the recently many teachers submitting their resignations". Nour Al-Ibrahim confirmed what Al-Shibli said and added: "The teacher earns approximately \$65 per month and this amount and with high prices, that is only sufficient for several days, and many teachers work after office hours to secure additional resources."

4. Services to Schools

Most schools in Deir Ezzor are either demolished or neglected. They are not equipped to accommodate students, including schools accredited for education. Nour Al Ibrahim said: "The majority of schools have no security fence, and this poses a risk to the lives of students. there is no protection for schools, and they are repeatedly robbed, and there are no cleaners to take

care of them, there is no what is essential, such as safes for the preservation and protection of official papers and furniture for teacher. Teachers use rudimentary means of education". "Stationery in schools is not enough for a teacher for one week. Teachers buy stationery at their own expense to complete education until the end of the month. Organizations that support schools are being interfered with by the powerful in the administration, and this affects school support," says Eid Al-Mutlaq.

5. The Role of Organizations in Supporting Education

Regarding the role of civil society organizations addressed by witnesses during the interviews, JFL researchers met with activists in organizations specialized in supporting the education sector. In Al-Kasrah, Ayman Al-Sayed, the former director of Bedaya Organization, said: "Bedaya Organization supported the restoration of the buildings of many schools, toilets, and organizing literacy classes." Al-Sayed added in his interview with JFL about what the organizations are doing: "Once an organization secures an education support project, it often heads to remote areas without schools, renovating existing school buildings to qualify them for student reception, appointing specialized educational staff, and providing a psychological support program for children, especially those affected by war or family violence". Mohamed Awad Al-Abboud, director of Insaf Development in Hajin, said: "The organizations provide programs on children's rights, disease prevention, hygienic habits, and hygiene. Those activities were intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some organizations provided bags and textbooks for distribution to educational facilities. some schools were provided with school seats, heaters, and fuel for heating". Mohammed Ziad, project manager at a civil society organization, spoke about their experience in Al-Bsaira: "Khalil Al-Khalaf and Abdullah Al-Shaher schools have been selected to implement the "Accelerated

Education" program, which targets children at ages of 10 years and more, to pursue education and fill the gaps left by the long dropout."

SECOND: TEACHERS' STRIKE IN DEIR EZZOR

Teachers in different areas of Deir Ezzor announced the strike. In some schools, all teachers became on strike. The strike began in schools in the eastern countryside on March 11, 2022, and extended to the western countryside. Now, most schools are on strike.

STRIKERS' DEMANDS

Increase Monthly Salaries

More Support for School Restoration

Activation of the Workers' Law

Activation of Role of the Teachers' Union

Provision of Health Insurance for Teachers

Including the Religious Education Subject in the Schools Curriculum

The strike was preceded by demands from teachers and civil society organizations in various regions of Deir Ezzor for the Education Commission on the priority of support of the education sector.

Stances toward the strike varied between supporting, opposing, and support with reservation. The reason was that the pro-strike saw it as the only way to force the Autonomous Administration to respond to their demands. In contrast, those who are rejected and reserved believe that the closure of schools could harm students' interests as a result of the strike.

1. The Autonomous Administration Stance on Strike

"The educational institution supports the rights of teachers, especially with regard to improving their living conditions. However, we do not support the closure of schools because of the negative impact on students," said Amina Al-Saleh, co-chair of the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor. The co-chair added: "We met the spokespersons of the educational institutes and fully discussed the teachers' demands. We discussed those demands when the Civil Council, which will submit them to the competent authorities. The joint presidency suggested to abolish the dismissal penalty stipulated for six months". During the interview, Mrs. Amina demanded that teachers return to their work to "reduce the harm on students". "The Executive Board of The Autonomous Administration held a meeting on April 4, 2022, and one of the issues raised to the discussion was raising of teachers' salaries, preceded by a meeting of teachers when the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor and the formal delivery of the demands on March 24, 2022," said Abdullah Al-Rizij on the Autonomous Administration's handling of the demands of the trained teachers. Al-Rizij is a participant in the strike at the Al-Kasrah Educational Complex. Several teachers said they had received letters threatening dismissal if they did not suspend their participation in the strike.

2. The attitude of the parents of the students to the strike

"There is no dispute over the teachers' demands, but I hope that the strike will be partial to minimize the impact of the strike on students," said Yasser Al-

Nayef, father of a student from Al-Busayrah town. Mahmoud Mohammed Al-Hassan, a father of a student at a school that struck, told a JFL researcher: "My stance on the strike is negative because closing schools is not the solution. Teachers should have ended the strike as soon as their demands are delivered to the competent authorities in the Autonomous Administration". Mr. Khader Hussein Al-Owaid, a father of a student in the town of Hajin says: "The demands of the teachers are right. As parents, we must support them, because if teachers' status continues this way, it will affect the entire educational process and thus affect our children."

3. Teachers' Stance on Strike

Mr. Abdullah Al-Rizij said: "Some schools did not participate in the strike for fear of being dismissed". While Abdul Majid Ali Al-Dich, a teacher of the educational complex in the town of Gharanij, east of Deir Ezzor, said: "We affirm the demands of the striking teachers, but in our council we saw that the priority is to follow up on education since the school year is at its end, especially that those responsible for education in Deir Ezzor met with the spokespersons of the educational complexes and the demands were delivered". Mr. Amer Al-Salama, a headmaster of a school in Al-Busayrah town, commented on the strike's results until now: "The most important thing is that the Autonomous Administration listened to our demands and promised to make decisions to meet the demands."

4. Civil Society Organizations' Stance on Strike

Ayman Al-Sayed, former director of Bedaya organization, said: "We did not intervene in the strike because we are a neutral party. we are not against teachers' demands, but we do not see a solution in the strike because the students are the only victims". The Director of Insaf Organization for Development in the town of Hajin, Mr. Mahmoud Awad Al-Aboud, talks about

the position of the organizations in Deir Ezzor regarding the strike: “We did not interfere in the strike, and the organizations did not take a stance on it. Rather, they maintained their neutrality not to be affected by the tensions and continue their work in providing services to various societal groups.”

THIRD: ADAPTATION OF STUDENTS' PARENTS TO THE EDUCATION CRISIS

In the light of the education crisis in Deir Ezzor, which is characterized by a lack of staff, a problem with curricula, a lack of recognition of tuition certificates, and school dropouts, hundreds of parents are trying to adapt to maintain their children's access to education and official degrees.

1. Education in Numbers

According to Mrs. Amina Al-Saleh, the co-chair of the Education Committee⁵ in Deir Ezzor, "The total number of schools in Deir Ezzor governorate is 678. Of which there are 521 primary schools and 157 middle schools. And there are no secondary or vocational courses due to the lack of students completing their secondary education in the Autonomous Administration schools since the only certificates recognized are the ones issued by the Syrian government." "The number of teachers in Deir Ezzor is 8,663, and that includes female teachers at 5,212 teachers. The committee provides services to 302,105 students; males and females. The largest portion of students is primary school students, whose number has reached nearly 200,000." Regarding school dropouts, Ms. Amina said: "According to the latest statistics, the number of students who have dropped out of school has reached 26,000 until the end of 2021."

⁵ The Autonomous Administration established the Education Committee in Deir Ezzor 2018, which is responsible for the educational process in governorate.

2. Frequent interruptions of education and school dropouts:

Due to the closure of schools and the suspension of the educational process entirely because of Covid-19, and the irregular functioning of the educational process and crises that have been encountered, Mr. Mahmoud Mohammed Al-Hassan, father of a student in Al-Kasra, said: "We educate our children at our own expense due to the repeated interruption of schools' operations. That is a heavy burden we carry during a difficult living situation." According to many students' families, the phenomenon of school dropouts is not new. But it has worsened after the war and its current economic and security effects, and there are no laws preventing school dropouts. Khudhair Hussein Al-Aweed, a father of a student in the town of Hajin, said: "Parents deal with school cuts as much as they can, including those who have taken refuge in private courses, others who do not appreciate the financial requirements of private education. Therefore, their children are completely cut off from education, and a group that has directed their children to the labor market to help the ailing to secure a living".

3. Completion of education in public schools:

"Most parents seek to ensure that their children reach areas of Syrian government control to continue their education", said Mrs. Jehan Al-Ukla from Al-Bsaira. That was confirmed by Mahmoud Al-Hassan saying "My daughter is in ninth grade. I am working on letting her take the Junior Certificate exam at a public school in government control areas. my relatives in those areas will make it easier for me to do so".

Most parents talked about the dangers of students' movement between the government and the Autonomous Administration areas. The risks are the possibility of security prosecutions or kidnapping, extortion, and conscription of over-18s compulsorily, especially since many students who have dropped out of

education during the war years are over this age and are still in school. On the other hand, obstacles can be summarized in high financial expenses and difficulty in reaching water crossings between the two sides of the river to reach government areas. Additionally, the members at river crossings on each side take advantage of exam times and impose a high amount of money to facilitate student transit.

FOURTH: CONCLUSION

The right to education is guaranteed under article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human⁶ Rights and article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural⁷ Rights and articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁸. The Syrian government has not fulfilled its obligations to encourage regular attendance and reduce dropout rates, as students in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces face great difficulties in going to public schools, including fear of being kidnapped or arrested and bargaining with parents, conscription, loss of identification⁹ documents¹⁰. Parents risk sending their children to study in those areas despite the risks they may be exposed to.

⁶ <https://bit.ly/3LePMGQ>

⁷ <https://bit.ly/3wqDQvU>

⁸ <https://bit.ly/39Vx3TD>

⁹ A Complaint to Three UN Special Rapporteurs on the Loss of Evidentiary Documents by Syrians - JFL - October 2020.

<https://bit.ly/3bVGMHI>

¹⁰ LOSS OF EVIDENTIARY DOCUMENTS IN SYRIA AWAITING FUNDAMENTAL SOLUTIONS - JFL - April 2020

<https://bit.ly/3yPQfu2>

In a comment¹¹ on article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Commission on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has set minimum requirements to provide an appropriate educational environment "buildings or other forms of prevention of natural factors, sanitation facilities for both sexes, drinkable water, trained teachers, teaching materials, as well as the need for physical and economic access to school". None of the dominant forces in Deir Ezzor was able to provide that standard minimum for education. Witnesses told JFL that restoring schools, increasing the number of classrooms, and securing sustainable energy and water sources are among the most prominent demands of teachers on strike. While there is contact between the SDF and the Syrian government is happening at the security, military, and political levels. Yet this communication has not been invested in improving the educational situation.

FIFTH: RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents of students and activists from civic organizations interviewed by JFL called for several recommendations to avoid the education crisis and secure a sustainable educational environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF STUDENTS' PARENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS WORKING IN DEIR EZZOR:

- Allocation of more schools to accommodate the growing number of students. That can be achieved by building new schools or turning existing buildings into schools.
- Raise teachers' wages and make a periodic assessment to match rising prices and inflation in local markets.

¹¹<https://bit.ly/3FBZRwb>

- The Autonomous Administration should announce annual allocations to the education sector. Forming an independent committee to control the disbursements of such allocations in application.
- Empowering workers in the educational sector by providing academic support programs by opening special institutes or contracting with specialized educational institutions, including educational qualification, classroom management, and the preparation of new teachers, as most teachers in the governorate are not academics.
- Provide schools with adequate textbooks, scientific laboratories, libraries, educational means, renewable energy sources, and sustainable water sources to reduce costs and improve the school environment.
- Attracting dropouts students by adopting intensive education programs to compensate for education losses and end the phenomenon of school drop-outs.
- Forming a specialized committee to provide material or in-kind education support to families who cannot provide education to their children.
- Support the psychological support programs and provide schools with whatever is needed to implement those programs; including special rooms for those activities, playgrounds and children's theatre, cultural programs, promotion competitions, and sponsorship of sports and artistic activities.
- Employing night guards for schools as many schools have been robbed and vandalized.

JFL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the testimonies that JFL obtained from students' parents, teachers, the Autonomous Administration officials, and civil society workers and their recommendations to improve the reality of education, JFL recommends the following:

THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

- Facilitate access to public schools for students in areas north of the Euphrates River by allocating water and land crossings. Prevent imposing financial payments on them by military checkpoints in the control areas. Completely halt threatening students or their relatives with arrest or kidnapping.

The Syrian Government

- Granting military postponement to students who were out of school and over the age of 18 to encourage them to complete education.
- Facilitate students and their families' access to identification papers to complete education, including issuing or changing personal cards and a family book.
- Facilitate access to previous years' certificates to help students complete education.

THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

- Raise the wages of teachers in the schools that the Autonomous Administration runs in proportion to the value of the Syrian pound and the sharp rise in prices.

- Allocate more financial support to qualifying more specialized teachers, restore schools, expand existing schools, increase class numbers, and provide adequate textbooks, necessary educational means, and electricity and water sources.
- Develop an education strategy and include civil society organizations, teachers, and parents of students.
- Allowing the formation of a teachers' union that has the right to exercise its work in protecting the rights of teachers.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

- Allocate more support to contribute to the restoration of destroyed schools, implement psychological support programs, and provide basic supplies to schools in coordination with the Autonomous Administration.
- The involvement of students' parents and teachers in planning civil society organizations' education projects so that the intervention meets local educational needs.

THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Allocate a budget to support families who cannot educate their children and focus on supporting girls' education. That budget must be split into:

- First, financial, or in-kind support (ex: public transportation) are provided to targeted families.
- Second: Raising awareness of the importance of education for both sexes and its positive impact on the student's life, their family, and their social environment.

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