

## SYRIA

***GCPEA identified over 85 reported attacks on schools during the 2020-2021 period, with most incidents reported in Idlib and Aleppo in early 2020. In northeast Syria, de facto authorities detained dozens of teachers for using the national curriculum, or for the purposes of forced conscription. Attacks on education declined during the 2020-2021 reporting period as hostilities declined.***

### **Context**

Armed conflict continued in Syria during the 2020-2021 reporting period. Hostilities decreased early in the reporting period as the Syrian government regained significant territorial control,<sup>1574</sup> and following a March 2020 ceasefire agreement between Turkey and Russia.<sup>1575</sup> However, shelling and airstrikes continued in Idlib governorate throughout 2020 and 2021<sup>1576</sup> and escalated from June 2021, which led to civilian casualties<sup>1577</sup> and the largest population displacement in northwest Syria since the start of the ceasefire. In 2020-2021, Idlib governorate remained primarily under the control of non-state armed groups.<sup>1578</sup> Human Rights Watch documented that in battles for control over Idlib, Syrian and Russian armed forces deliberately attacked civilian objects using banned weapons in early 2020.<sup>1579</sup>

In northeast Syria, the Kurdish-led armed group Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), controlled areas in Deir-ez-Zor, Raqqa, and Al Hasaka governorates and continued to fight against the Islamic State (IS) during the 2020-2021 reporting period.<sup>1580</sup> ACLED reported an increase in alleged IS attacks in eastern Syria in late 2020.<sup>1581</sup> In addition, SDF battled Syrian government forces and Turkish-backed pro-government armed groups in the region.<sup>1582</sup> The Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Syria reported that parties to conflict had arbitrarily arrested tens of thousands of Syrians and subjected detainees, including children, to torture and sexual violence since the beginning of the conflict and through 2020.<sup>1583</sup>

In 2020, the Syrian pound plummeted in value, deepening the economic crisis.<sup>1584</sup> Rising food prices and unemployment due to Covid-19 contributed to a record high number of 12.4 million Syrians facing food insecurity in 2020, according to the World Food Program.<sup>1585</sup> The UN reported that conflict, economic crisis, and the pandemic disproportionately affected women and girls, including an increase in gender-based violence.<sup>1586</sup> Over half of Syria's population remained internally displaced or were refugees in 2021, according to the UN.<sup>1587</sup>

In 2020, the UN estimated that 2.5 million children were out of school in Syria, and that more than one-third of schools had been damaged or destroyed due to attacks since the beginning of the conflict.<sup>1588</sup> In an assessment conducted in December 2020, Save the Children found that two out of three children in northern Syria were out of school, many forced to abandon their studies so they could support their families by working.<sup>1589</sup> In order to prevent the spread of Covid-19, schools in Syria closed from March 14 to September 13, 2020, though localized closures occurred after September 2020 and throughout the reporting period.<sup>1590</sup> In northeast Syria, de facto authorities enforced a local curriculum in some schools, affecting students' ability to obtain diplomas recognized in government-controlled areas, according to the UN.<sup>1591</sup> In the northwest, teachers' strikes in early 2021 further destabilized the education system; over 6,000 teachers had not received salary payments for over a year at the time of striking.<sup>1592</sup>

### **Attacks on Schools**

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least 85 incidents of attacks on schools in Syria. This marked a decline from previous years. For example, in *Education under Attack 2020*, GCPEA identified over-260 incidents of attacks on schools in 2018 and 2019.<sup>1593</sup>

In 2020, the UN verified 61 attacks on education, 90 percent of which occurred in northwest Syria, and most in the first quarter of the year, which were largely perpetrated by government or pro-government forces.<sup>1594</sup> UN-verified reports of attacks on schools and school personnel declined by nearly half in 2020 as compared to 2019.<sup>1595</sup> Similarly, GCPEA collated around 60 reported incidents of attacks on schools in Syria from UN, NGO, and media sources. As in 2019, Idlib continued to be the governorate most affected by attacks on schools in 2020; GCPEA identified over 35 reported incidents of shelling or airstrikes there, most of which occurred during a period of intense fighting between January and March 2020.<sup>1596</sup> However, the frequency of attacks in Idlib sharply declined compared to 2019, when over 130 reported

incidents of air-launched or ground-launched strikes were recorded.<sup>1597</sup> This decrease may have occurred due to the abovementioned reduced fighting after a ceasefire between Turkey and Russia in March 2020. In 2020, GCPEA also identified reports of at least 15 attacks on schools in Aleppo,<sup>1598</sup> most of which involved airstrikes or ground-launched shelling.

Reported incidents of attacks on schools in Idlib and Aleppo governorates in 2020 included:

- On February 3, 2020, an airstrike hit Atarib School for Boys in Atarib, Jebel Saman district, Aleppo governorate, according to the UN and a local human rights monitor.<sup>1599</sup> The attack reportedly damaged the building and furniture.
- On February 4, 2020, OCHA, Airwars, and a local human rights monitor reported that heavy shelling struck a school in Afrin town, Aleppo governorate, while classes were taking place.<sup>1600</sup> OCHA, ACLED, and the human rights monitor reported that the attack allegedly injured eight students, and Airwars and the human rights monitor reported that the school's building and furniture were damaged during the attack. Two schools were damaged in the attack, according to Airwars, however GCPEA could not confirm this at the time of writing.<sup>1601</sup>
- Save the Children and local organization Hurras Network reported that on February 25, 2020, shelling struck ten schools in Idlib governorate, killing at least three teachers and injuring dozens of children and around seven teachers.<sup>1602</sup> The UN verified eight attacks on schools and seven teacher casualties in Idlib city on that day.<sup>1603</sup> Several of the schools sustained damage and reportedly closed following the attacks, affecting the education of thousands of students; for instance, Human Rights Watch reported that cluster munitions struck the yards of Bra'am secondary school and Khalid Sha'ar primary school in Idlib city at around 8:30 a.m., killing three teachers and injuring six, and damaging both schools. The schools, which served a total of 1,400 students, closed for several days.<sup>1604</sup> Human Rights Watch and the UN also reported that the shelling destroyed Mounib Qamisheh primary school, a facility that served 1,200 students.<sup>1605</sup>
- Save the Children and the UN reported that on November 4, 2020, shelling and fragments struck Al Hikmah Education Complex in Kafraya, Ariha district, Idlib governorate, while approximately 150 students were in attendance. No students or teachers were injured or killed.<sup>1606</sup>

In addition, GCPEA identified at least nine reported incidents of attacks on schools in Al Hasaka, Damascus, Dar'a, Deir-ez-Zor, Homs, and Quneitra governorates, most of which involved improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or other explosives.<sup>1607</sup> For example:

- On May 1, 2020, an explosion occurred outside Homs Palestine Refugee Camp, in Homs governorate. Fragments from the blast hit the Al Shajara school, located inside the camp and operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), damaging part of its roof, according to UNRWA.<sup>1608</sup>
- The UN, ACLED, RTNews, and a local human rights monitor reported that on June 21, 2020, a roadside IED detonated next to Mahattah al-Thaniyah school in Dar'a city and governorate. The blast allegedly damaged the school's building and fence and killed two children, though the report did not specify whether the children were students at the school.<sup>1609</sup>

In 2021, the UN verified 28 attacks on schools.<sup>1610</sup> In the same year, GPCEA recorded at least 25 reports of attacks on schools in Syria.<sup>1611</sup> These reports, which came from the UN, NGOs, media, and a human rights monitor, occurred primarily in Idlib governorate and involved 19 reports of airstrikes or ground-launched strikes, three reports of small arms fire, and three reports of an IED or UXO affecting a school, and one raid by an alleged armed group. Examples of incidents included:

- On January 14, 2021, the UN verified that a rocket struck Al-Sabbagh school in Ariha city, Idlib governorate, damaging the building. The UN, and a civil society monitor, did not report any casualties.<sup>1612</sup>
- The UN and a human rights monitor reported that on March 21, 2021, fighting in Ariha city, Idlib governorate, affected a school. The human rights monitor reported that artillery shells struck in the yard of the Jeel al Ghad school and damaged its yard, fence, and building.<sup>1613</sup> The UN reported that the attack caused all schools in

Ariha to close for a day and subsequently move to distance learning for an unspecified duration.<sup>1614</sup>

- On June 9, 2021, the UN verified that three rockets struck Abrar camp in Suwwaghiya city, Idlib governorate, destroying Abrar school.<sup>1615</sup>
- On July 3, 2021, a local human rights monitor reported that shelling hit Tishreen School in Ariha city, Idlib, and partially destroyed buildings and furniture.<sup>1616</sup> ACLED reported that the attack killed four children.<sup>1617</sup>
- On September 2, 2021, a local human rights monitor reported that a shell allegedly hit the Rasem al Omar Secondary School Ein Laruz town in Idlib governorate. and partially destroyed the external fence, as well as furniture inside the building.<sup>1618</sup>
- On September 5, 2021, the UN verified that more than one rocket struck an educational establishment in Ma'arrat Misrin town in Idlib governorate. The rocket destroyed the school building. This attack reportedly killed six children.<sup>1619</sup>
- On October 20, 2021, shelling in Ariha city, Idlib governorate allegedly landed near Abdulhamid Ghunaymi school and destroyed some of the school buildings. The attack reportedly occurred when students were traveling to school. ACLED reported that the attack allegedly killed 12 people, including students and teachers.<sup>1620</sup>
- On December 13, 2021, ACLED and a local human rights monitor reported that armed forces shelled a school in the village of Maarzaf in Idlib governorate. The school allegedly sustained damages including to its fence and gate.<sup>1621</sup>

Although incidents of attacks on schools declined during the reporting period, explosive remnants of war (ERW) continued to affect schools, according to the UN. In March 2021, the UN reported that ERW affected safe access to schools and other civilian infrastructure across conflict-affected areas of the country.<sup>1622</sup> The ICRC also noted that in Syria, children faced a high risk of landmines and ERW on the way to and from school.<sup>1623</sup> In addition, Syrian government forces reportedly established checkpoints in Manbij city, Aleppo governorate, and prevented educational supplies from reaching displaced students north of Aleppo.<sup>1624</sup>

### ***Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel***

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least 17 reported incidents of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel. Attacks increased slightly as compared to 2018 and 2019, when GCPEA identified around three attacks on school students and staff per year.<sup>1625</sup> In particular, GCPEA identified an increase in arrests, threats, or intimidation of students and teachers, primarily in Al Hasaka, Deir-ez-Zor, and Raqqa governorates.

In 2020, GCPEA identified three incidents of attacks on school teachers and students, as well as anecdotal evidence of similar attacks.<sup>1626</sup> In one example, the UN reported that armed groups in Raqqa and other governorates threatened and harassed students traveling from conflict affected areas to government-controlled areas to take exams in June 2020.<sup>1627</sup> For example, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a local human rights monitor, reported that on June 17, 2020, an armed group beat and detained students traveling from Idlib governorate to Hama governorate to take exams. At least two students were held for several hours during which the armed group shaved their heads.<sup>1628</sup>

In addition, on September 13, 2020, *Syria Times* reported that members of an armed group beat and threatened students and teachers who were protesting the group's use of Martyr Hanna Atallah High School in Al Hasaka town and governorate.<sup>1629</sup>

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least 14 incidents of attacks on school students, teachers and other education personnel.<sup>1630</sup> Of these, two involved the alleged targeted killing of teachers and nine incidents involved the arrest of school teachers in Al Hasaka governorate. According to media reports and the UN, local authorities that controlled areas of Al Hasaka governorate mandated the use of their own curriculum in place of the Syrian government's program.<sup>1631</sup> Between January 1 and February 15, 2021, local authorities reportedly detained dozens of teachers who continued to teach the government curriculum, according to a local human rights monitor.<sup>1632</sup> The UN reported that in February 2021 alone, de facto authorities arrested 23 teachers for teaching the government curricula.<sup>1633</sup> Some teachers and students who protested the detention of teachers were also reported to be arrested or attacked. Examples included:

- On January 19, 2021, local human rights organizations and media reported that SDF security forces detained seven teachers from Darbasiyah town, Ras al Ain district, Al Hasaka governorate, for teaching the Syrian government curriculum.<sup>1634</sup>
- A local human rights organization and a media outlet also reported that on January 20, 2021, in response to the arrest of teachers the previous day, school teachers and students held a protest in Darbasiyah, Ras al Ain district, Al Hasaka governorate. Local security forces reportedly dispersed the protesters, beat several students, and arrested 17 students, some of whom were allegedly minors.<sup>1635</sup> The UN reported that all but one of the detained teachers were released.<sup>1636</sup>
- A local human rights monitor and ACLED reported that local authorities arrested five teachers from Amuda city, Quamishli district, Al Hasaka governorate, on February 6, 2021.<sup>1637</sup> Also in Amuda city, the UN reported that on February 7 and 8, 2021, armed parties arrested and released nine teachers who were accused of teaching the government curriculum.<sup>1638</sup>
- On August 7, 2021, local authorities arrested five teachers in al-Malikeyyeh, Al Hasaka governorate, for allegedly teaching the government curriculum, according to local media.<sup>1639</sup>

Also in 2021, the Syrian Democratic Forces began to explicitly target and forcibly conscript teachers, according to local media reports. A local human rights organization reported that SDF allegedly arrested 34 teachers in order to conscript them into the armed group between January 1 and February 15, 2021. The organization also estimated that around 550 teachers had been removed from their posts after refusing to join the ranks of the armed group.<sup>1640</sup>

In 2021, school students also experienced interferences to their education that may have constituted threats. In June 2021, the UN reported that many students in northwest Syria did not travel across front lines to take final exams in areas under government control out of fear of harassment, conscription, or arrest.<sup>1641</sup> Also in northwest Syria, on September 16, 2021, local authorities used force to disperse a student protest in Ain al Arab, Aleppo; students were demanding that local authorities permit teaching of the government curriculum, according to ACLED and local media.<sup>1642</sup>

### ***Military use of schools and universities***

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified over 35 incidents of military use of schools and universities. In 2019, the UN verified reports of 32 incidents of military use of schools in Syria, primarily by non-state armed group People's Protection Units (YPG), government forces, or factions of SDF,<sup>1643</sup> and in 2018 the UN verified 24 incidents of military use of schools.<sup>1644</sup>

In 2020, the UN verified 31 cases of military use of schools in Syria, three-quarters of which occurred in northeast Syria.<sup>1645</sup> Also in 2020, the UN verified that government forces had vacated 12 schools previously used in 2019 or the first half of 2020.<sup>1646</sup> Among other military purposes, the UN documented that parties to conflict used some schools as detention centers throughout Syria between 2011 and 2020.<sup>1647</sup>

In 2020, GCPEA identified four reports of military use of schools, including the following:

- In May 2020, the UN reported that SDF used the Yarmouk School, located in Karayji, Deir-ez-Zor governorate, for military purposes while it was closed during Covid-19 confinement measures.<sup>1648</sup>
- STJ reported that in July 2020, an armed group was using a primary school in Gharanij town, Abu Kamal district, Deir-ez-Zor governorate, as an office for its Anti-Terrorism Department.<sup>1649</sup>
- A local human rights organization reported that state security forces raided Abdul Fattah Qazziz school in Ma'aret al Numan city, Al Ma'ra district, Idlib governorate, on September 10, 2020. The forces allegedly looted the school and used it as a training center.<sup>1650</sup>
- In September 2020, *Syria Times* and ACLED reported that an armed group occupied Martyr Hanna Atallah High School in Al Hasaka city and governorate and barred students and staff from entering.<sup>1651</sup>

In 2021, the UN verified 17 cases of military use of schools.<sup>1652</sup> Also in 2021, GCPEA identified at least six reported incidents of military use of schools by armed groups in Daraa. In October 2021, local news sources reported that armed groups continued to use six schools in Lajat district, Daraa governorate as military headquarters, schools which they

have been using since 2018. The reports noted that at least one of the schools was partially operational for education purposes while the military occupied another part of the building.<sup>1653</sup>

### **Attacks on higher education**

During the 2020-2021 reporting period, GCPEA identified at least five incidents of attacks on higher education. During the period covered by *Education under Attack 2020*, GCPEA also identified sporadic incidents of attacks on higher education, with only two reported incidents in 2019 and three in 2018.<sup>1654</sup>

In 2020, GCPEA identified at least three incidents of attacks on higher education facilities in Aleppo and Damascus governorates, from the UN and a human rights monitor. These incidents involved shelling or other explosive weapons and damaged at least two of the facilities:

- A local human rights organization reported that a shell struck near Ittihad Private University in Aleppo city, Jebel Saman district, Aleppo governorate, on January 12, 2020, damaging the facility's building and furniture.<sup>1655</sup>
- The UN reported that on February 1, 2020, several ground-launched strikes hit the University of Aleppo in Aleppo governorate.<sup>1656</sup>
- On February 25, 2020, the UN reported that an IED detonated inside a car near Al-Sham Private university in Damascus city and governorate. The report listed two civilian casualties but did not specify whether they attended or worked at the university.<sup>1657</sup>

In 2021, GCPEA identified at least two attacks on higher education personnel and one on a higher education facility:

- Local media and a human rights monitor reported that on April 7, 2021, residents near al Tawama village, Idlib governorate, recovered the dead body of university professor who also served as the Minister of Higher Education for the de facto administration in northwest Syria. The professor had gone missing on April 3, 2021, while he was on his way to work. His body showed signs of torture.<sup>1658</sup>
- On July 21, 2021, artillery shells struck a compound housing a teacher training institute in Bara town, Jabal al Zaweya, Idlib governorate, according to a human rights monitor. The building sustained minor damages.<sup>1659</sup>

In 2021, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative also released a report documenting direct violence against medical and nursing educators and students in northwest Syria.<sup>1660</sup> These attacks, along with the conflict's other effects on the healthcare education and provision system, caused a reported shortage in medical professionals in non-government-controlled areas.

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<sup>1654</sup> Ben Hubbard, "Syria's Economy Collapses Even as Civil War Winds to a Close," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2020.

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<sup>1657</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syrian Arab Republic: Developments in north-west Syria and Ras Al Ain – Tell Abiad: Situation Report No. 33 – November 2021", December 16, 2021. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Syrian Arab Republic: Developments in north-west Syria and Ras Al Ain- Tell Abiad – Situation Report No. 31 -September 2021", October 13, 2021. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syrian Arab Republic: Developments in north-west Syria and Ras Al Ain – Tell Abiad – Situation Report No. 34 – December 2021", January 17, 2022.

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<sup>1659</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Targeting Life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure," (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2020), [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media\\_2020/10/syria1020\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/10/syria1020_web.pdf) (accessed December 17, 2020), p. 111.

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- <sup>1587</sup> “Syria Refugee Crisis,” UNHCR, March 2021.
- <sup>1588</sup> OCHA, “Humanitarian Response Plan Syrian Arab Republic,” December 2020, pp. 9, 49.
- <sup>1589</sup> Sonia Khush, “Briefing to the United Nations Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria,” February 25, 2021, p. 1.
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- <sup>1591</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic,” S/2021/398, April 23 2021, para. 31.
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<sup>1648</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary-General on Children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic,” S/2021/398,

April 23 2021, para. 30.

<sup>1649</sup> Justice For Life (JFL) and Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), “Deir ez-Zor: Dozens Arbitrarily Arrested during SDF’s “Deterrence of Terrorism” Campaign,” Joint report, October 16, 2020, p. 7.

<sup>1650</sup> SNHR, as cited in ACLED, Event ID SYR81986 (data downloaded December 17, 2020). “Syrian regime transforms a school of Ma’aret al Numan city in Idlib suburbs to a military headquarter on the International Day for the Protection of Education from Attacks,” SNHR news release, September 12, 2020.

<sup>1651</sup> Twitter, as cited in ACLED, Event ID SYR82132 (data downloaded December 17, 2020). “The SDF militia prevents high school students in Hasaka from entering their school and attacks them and school staff during their sit-in,” *Syria Times*, September 13, 2020.

<sup>1652</sup> Information shared by a UN respondent via email on April 21, 2022.

<sup>1653</sup> “Schools in Syria’s Daraa turn into military barracks”, *North Press Agency Syria*, October 5, 2021.

<sup>1654</sup> GCPEA, *Education under Attack 2020*, Syria chapter.

<sup>1655</sup> “An unknown- source shell fell near a university in Aleppo city, on January 12,” SNHR news release, January 13, 2020.

<sup>1656</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary General on the Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020),” S/2020/327, April 23, 2020, p. 17.

<sup>1657</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Report of the Secretary General on the Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018) and 2504 (2020),” S/2020/327, April 23, 2020, p. 19.

<sup>1658</sup> Facebook; SOHR, as cited in ACLED, Event ID SYR89026. “Body of the Syrian Salvation Govt’s Minister of Higher Education found in Aleppo governorate on Apr 7, days after he was reported missing,” SNHR news release, April 8, 2021. “Minister of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham found dead in Syria’s Idlib,” North Press Agency, April 7, 2021.

<sup>1659</sup> “Syrian regime forces bombed a school in al Bara town in Idlib suburbs on July 21, SNHR news release, July 21, 2021.

<sup>1660</sup> Adrienne Fricke and Rahaf Safi, “Window of Hope: Sustaining education of health professionals in northwest Syria,” Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, March 2021.