

Conference on Aid to Yemen Highlights Support for Education

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Edward Fox

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At a United Nations conference on humanitarian aid to Yemen, held in Geneva on February 26, representatives of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates publicly emphasized a \$70 million grant they pledged for the payment of Yemeni schoolteachers' salaries, which have largely been unpaid in recent years as the war continues. But there is uncertainty about whether and how this money will reach its intended recipients.

The grant for teachers' salaries was mentioned independently of the overall grant the two countries promised for humanitarian aid to Yemen, which has risen to \$500 million from each. The money for teachers' salaries was first pledged in October 2018.

A report by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, published to coincide with the donor conference, describes bleak conditions for teachers and students in much of Yemen. Hundreds of schools have been destroyed in the four years of fighting, the report says, and nearly five million children are in need of educational assistance.

“The fighting has had a brutal impact on education,” it says.

Among other hardships, the report identified a lack of funds for paying teachers' salaries as "one of the most pressing challenges facing Yemen's educational system."

"Teachers and other education personnel in Yemen's 12 northern governorates, which are controlled by Houthi forces, have either not received their salaries at all for more than two years, or only partially received them," it says.

Saudi Arabia and the Emirates are the main combatants on one side of the fighting in Yemen, where they support the internationally recognized government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi against the Houthi movement.

Moosa Elayah, a senior research fellow and lecturer at Radboud University, in the Netherlands, and a professor at Sana'a University, said that the Saudi-Emirati grant is likely to have been given to President Hadi's administration, even though it controls only part of the country. "Payments made to the Hadi administration will not reach teachers in Houthi-held areas," Elayah said.

"Seventy percent of teachers in Yemen are in the governorates of Sana'a, Ta'iz and Ibb, which are areas controlled by Houthi forces and outside the reach of the Hadi regime," Elayah said.

Also, Elayah estimates the delivery cost of aid in Yemen at between 40 and 70 percent. That is, about half of aid money disappears before it reaches its intended recipients.

"A clear mechanism is needed to distribute this money," Elayah said.

Waleed Mahdi, an assistant professor at the College of International Studies at the University of Oklahoma, in the United States, said that in the absence of a functioning civil service in Yemen, there is uncertainty about who is on the teachers' payroll. "Whatever records they have are not necessarily up to date," Mahdi said.

Also, in the absence of a functioning central bank, teachers can only receive their salaries through Kuraimi Express, a private financial service. "To collect your money, you have to go to one of their offices," Mahdi said. "The money is only available for a few days, and if you don't collect it in time, you have to hope you will get paid the following month," he said. On the other hand, "They are able to operate all over the country, regardless of political divisions."

Mahdi and Elayah said the public emphasis on teachers' salaries at the United Nations donor conference could be seen as part of a nonmilitary front in the Saudi-Emirati campaign in Yemen; that is, an effort to win hearts and minds.

"The Emiratis have refurbished some schools in Aden," a southern port city under the Hadi government's control, Mahdi said. But these efforts "are not thorough," he added. "They are photogenic, and sanitize the image."

Similarly, Mahdi said, there has been Saudi support for education in the Mahri language, an indigenous, non-Arabic language spoken in eastern Yemen that is one of six Modern South Arabian languages. (See a related article, *“Ancient Cousins of Arabic Survive in Oman—but for How Long?”*) The support for education in this minority language follows a provision of the 2014 National Dialogue pact in Yemen, a short-lived peace agreement that preceded the civil war.

“That agreement included recognition of the Modern South Arabian languages,” Mahdi said. “It was a token of a new Yemen, in which the disenfranchisement of the speakers of these languages would be recognized by establishing them as official languages. In this way, the Saudis are creating political channels to the Mahri.”

Schools Under Attack

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack is an international umbrella organization of groups that work to protect schools, students and teachers from attacks. It defines attacks on education as any threatened or actual use of force against students, teachers, staff members, or education officials, as well as attacks on buildings, resources, or property.

Its recent report, “Safeguard Yemen’s Future: Protect Education from Attack,” presents a detailed picture of the damaged state of Yemen’s schools. “By March 2018,” the report states, “nearly 500,000 children had dropped out of school since the start of the conflict.”

The situation “has been exacerbated by attacks on education, particularly airstrikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, ground fighting, and crossfire,” it says. More than 250 schools have been destroyed, more than 1,500 have been damaged, “and 23 are currently occupied by armed groups.”

Diya Nijhowne, the international organization’s executive director, said in a statement after the publication of the report that the “pledges by governments to contribute \$2.6 billion to fund humanitarian efforts in Yemen are desperately needed and welcomed, particularly the commitments to support education and teacher salaries. Yemen will be unable to rebuild without the education sector being rehabilitated, and this will be impossible without education itself being protected.”