



THE AZRAQ EDUCATION & COMMUNITY FUND

2021 Annual Report



Lina, 10



Abdallah, 8



The Azraq Education & Community Fund

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR REFUGEE KIDS AND FAMILIES ABOUT OUR WORK

Our mission is to restore dignity and enrich the lives of Syrian refugees and other vulnerable families by providing innovative education opportunities and critical humanitarian aid via our flagship program, The Azraq Education Center, in the town of South Azraq, Jordan.

The Azraq Education and Community Fund (AECF) provides opportunities for refugee families to create a sense of normalcy after experiencing tremendous hardships caused by the ongoing conflict in Syria. In the face of this enormous humanitarian crisis, we focus our efforts in the small, rural town of South Azraq, Jordan where today nearly half of the town population are refugees. This community is underserved by large, mainstream aid organizations and AECF provides meaningful contributions to directly improve the lives of residents.

WE HAVE A LOT TO CELEBRATE

A LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I am so proud of everything we accomplished in 2021! The ongoing pandemic forced our community to adapt time and again to shifting circumstances—but through it all The Azraq Education Center staff, teachers, and families remained resilient, upbeat, and fully committed to the success of our students.

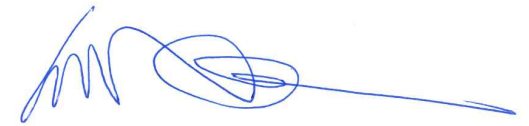
When we switched to distance learning, teachers went out of their way to hand-deliver worksheets to students' homes and parents helped their kids stay connected via WhatsApp on family mobile devices. I was encouraged to see that even when apart, we could continue moving forward.

The sweetest moment of the year, however, came when we finally got to put down permanent roots for The Azraq Education Center. In the fall of 2021, we opened the doors to a brand new facility designed to help our students thrive. This has been a dream long in the making and was made possible through the generosity, hard work, and dedication of many.

I am proud to report that in 2021, the Jordanian government recognized AECF as an international NGO operating in Jordan. This status will allow us to expand our partnerships and create even more impact in the community. To that end, we are already looking forward to collaborating with several new partners including Jordan River Foundation, World Vision, Amideast, and UNHCR.

Our work is cut out for us in 2022. In too many ways, the pandemic has exacted a heavy toll on an already vulnerable population. But I am confident that with everything we have planned, we can continue bringing much-needed relief to refugee families and providing South Azraq's kids with a chance to grow up happy, healthy, and ready for the future.

I am immensely grateful to our partners and supporters from across the world who make our work possible. A heartfelt thank you to everyone who made 2021 so noteworthy and onward to a productive year ahead!



Lexi Shereshevsky, *Executive Director*



A DECADE OF CRISIS, A WELL OF HOPE

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES WE SEE TODAY

Ten years into the Syrian refugee crisis, six years into our mission, and two years into the pandemic, immense challenges remain for the community of South Azraq, Jordan.

Though stories of Syrian refugees have faded from international headlines, thousands of families still need a helping hand in building stable, healthy lives.

CONSIDER THAT:

- Jordan is host to over 1.4 million Syrian refugees, the overwhelming majority of whom live in poverty. **Nearly 85% of Syrian refugees were living below the poverty line before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, poverty among refugees has increased by 18%.**
- Most refugees live outside refugee camps, where access to international aid is limited. Instead, families are doing their best to navigate tough circumstances with little support. Many have been cutting back on meals and other essentials in order to get by. **A devastating 41% of Syrian families reported that their children went to bed hungry during the COVID-19 lockdown. Today, 80% of refugee households are considered food insecure.**

- Jordan faces unique obstacles when it comes to education. The country's "double-shift" school system means that school days are condensed and classrooms are often run by inexperienced teachers. Dropout rates are high and barriers like child labor, mental health issues, and early marriage can keep students out of the classroom. **Though the Jordanian government offered distance learning programs during the COVID-19 lockdown, 1 in 4 students missed out on classes due to lack of internet, guidance, or awareness.**

The good news is that Jordan remains a safe and welcoming home for refugees. But the country's welfare systems are straining under the weight of current needs. That is why it is so important for organizations like AECF and committed donors to help bridge the gap.

We have a crucial opportunity to change the facts on the ground and make a lasting impact for Syrian refugees. Since 2015, we have seen how our educational programs, coupled with humanitarian aid, can transform the lives of kids and families. We are confident that together with passionate partners and supporters, we can ensure the South Azraq community emerges from the pandemic with every chance for success.



THE AZRAQ EDUCATION CENTER

ENHANCING EDUCATION FOR 300+ STUDENTS

“There was one little girl who was so shy, she did not even want to tell us her name. But the more she got to know her classmates, the more she started to open up. With some special encouragement, she is finding her place at school and in the world.”

- Manar Nofal, Grade 2 Teacher

In 2014, The Azraq Education Center opened its first two emergency classrooms to host Syrian refugee children without an opportunity to go to school. **Today, the center hosts more than 300 students ages 3-18 (55% girls and 45% boys) for daily remedial education.**

The curriculum—which includes instruction in Arabic, English, Math, and IT, as well as Science, Art, Music, and Sports activities—is designed to complement the Jordanian government school system.

Our goal for The Azraq Education Center is to help Syrian refugee children make up for the years of education they missed due to the war, catch up to their appropriate grade level, and develop a deep love of learning that will carry them through high school graduation and beyond.

We also hope to benefit the wider community through regular outreach and shared activities. We encourage parents to stay involved with the center and look forward to creating more parent-specific committees.

The Azraq Education Center is a 100% donor-supported program run in partnership with Nachmyat Eastern Badia Cooperative in Jordan and many generous friends and supporters.

A YEAR OF ADAPTATION

For the first half of 2021, The Azraq Education Center continued to use a distance learning model to keep classes going for our students. The success of our distance program was due in large part to the dedication of our teachers and administrators who ensured students stayed connected and engaged with course material, even if their families did not have internet access. Our team members persevered and remained flexible through it all!

Over the summer, we were thrilled to welcome students back for in-person classes. Because so many children fell behind despite our best efforts, we spent time doing intensive catch-up with all the kids and created individual placement tests and specialized learning plans.

Our team also undertook a big move. Nearly seven years after we opened our first two emergency classrooms for Syrian refugee children in need of an education in South Azraq, we finally achieved our dream of settling into a new, permanent building for The Azraq Education Center.

The new center, located just a mile away from our original location, is equipped with 10 classrooms, a dedicated Montessori pre-k room, IT lab, fantastic library, fully equipped kitchen, administrative room, and outdoor space with countless future programming opportunities.



A FOCUS ON RETENTION

One of our top priorities for 2021 was student retention. While any amount of schooling is helpful, we know that consistent engagement is what helps build children's confidence and prepares them for the future. We therefore approached retention with a renewed sense of urgency. **We have treated our distance learning program as an essential touchpoint for students and are prioritizing keeping everyone involved. As a result, we have thus far retained nearly 100% of our pre-pandemic student body.**

Nearly 60% of our students have been with The Azraq Education Center for more than three years—a number we hope to continue to grow.



Fatima, 9



Israa & Kholood, 12

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Our job is to help every student navigate the world, which is why we are proud to be able to offer individual support to students with special needs. Currently, one of our teachers is leading a class for deaf students and undergoing intensive training with UNHCR to learn how to expand the center's sign language program and help more students with their literacy skills.

Moving forward, we will be working closely with UNHCR to identify students who would benefit from individual academic attention and looking at how we can help more kids partake in school life and learn in ways that work for them.



Batool, 8



Jaafar, 11



Abd al Majeed, Majed, & Hazam, 9



Jood, 10

2021 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Library Programs

Both at home and in person, we are dedicated to inspiring young readers. We distributed books via our “mobile library” for at-home reading and celebrated our best readers at the center with special prizes!

Promoting Hygiene

We partnered with World Vision throughout the year to bring hygiene workshops to our students that encouraged healthy habits like hand washing, tooth brushing, and staying home when you are sick.

Writing School Rules

To encourage leadership and responsibility, our students were in charge of writing our code of conduct at the new building. The new rules are all about respect, collaboration, and creativity!

Environmental Initiatives

Our new school is a home for our students, and we want them to take responsibility not just for their studies but for the space itself. When at the center, students participate in gardening and tending to the grounds to help keep their school clean and beautiful. Stay tuned for a new community garden coming in spring 2022!

Film Workshop

Over the course of one week, 9th and 10th grade girls worked together with filmmaker Beryl Shereshewsky to create their own short film. They brainstormed the concept and learned how to write a script, draft a storyboard, and frame their shots. Watch the film on our website, theazraqfund.org!



MONTESSORI-INSPIRED EARLY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AZRAQ

“We had one boy who would come late and cry and not want to be there. But the teachers went out of their way to welcome him, inspire him, and communicate with his parents, so it was not long before he started to love the school and his classes. Now he would hate to miss a day.”

-Haneen Afeer, Montessori Teacher

A Montessori-inspired pre-k is one of The Azraq Education Center’s signature programs and is run in partnership with the Blossom Hill Foundation. We chose the Montessori method for its emphasis on creativity, collaborative play, and hands-on learning. In 2019, we partnered with the Modern Montessori School in Amman, Jordan to offer our inaugural class of early education teachers 140 hours of training in Montessori instruction. We have continued to invest in training and, this past year, our teachers completed another 60-hour course with Montessori for Lebanon.

We are proud to bring this kind of specialized education to young kids in South Azraq. Our pre-k is the only early childhood education program in the area and currently serves nearly 80 children ages 3-5.

We are also grateful to have had the support of The Montessori School of Wilton, Connecticut throughout the pandemic. With their distance learning curriculum support, we have been able to ensure our youngest students keep their learning going, even from afar.



Abdallah & Tasneem, 4



Mohammed, Ruby & Yusif, 5

PROVIDING CRUCIAL HUMANITARIAN AID TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

A core component of our mission is to provide humanitarian aid to refugee families in South Azraq.

Before they can build a better future, kids and family members need the basics, including enough food to eat, proper hygiene supplies, heat in the winter, and stable employment opportunities. Unfortunately, these provisions remain out of reach for the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees, more than 85% of whom live in extreme poverty.

In order to get by, a 2019 study found that refugee households in Jordan are consuming less food, racking up debt by buying food on credit, reducing all non-essential expenditures even to the detriment of their health, and taking on exploitative or dangerous employment.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made circumstances worse. According to a survey we conducted of the families we serve:

- 100% are in need of basic food items like rice, lentils, and flour.
- 90% lost income or include someone who lost their job as a result of pandemic closures and lockdowns.
- 97% do not have reliable internet access at home (shared mobile devices remain the only way children are able to access distance learning programs).

We are committed to reducing food insecurity.

We worked with our local partner, Nachmyat Eastern Badia Cooperative, throughout 2020 and 2021 to provide regular food distributions to the 140 families attending The Azraq Education Center, as well as to other vulnerable Jordanian families in the area. Deliveries included essential staples like rice, oil, sugar, beans, fresh meat, and fresh fruit and vegetables. And we continued our joint effort to distribute hygiene products, fuel for heaters in winter, and other essentials.

We also made sure to run our school lunch program whenever classrooms were open. Every day, students received a nutritious and filling meal including protein-packed ingredients like yogurt, chickpeas, or lentils.

We took special care to respond to urgent medical needs. Thanks to the partnerships we have in place, we were able to arrange visits to the doctor for kids and family members, medication for a student with epilepsy, eyeglasses for students who were going without, and hearing aids for a number of deaf students we serve. We are also glad to be able to provide physical therapy for a student whose spine was severely injured during the war in Syria.

In 2022, we will continue working closely with our partners to help our community recover from the severe impact of the pandemic and achieve a healthy and sustainable living standard.



Fruit & Vegetable Distribution



Ayad, 7



Um Ahmed, School Cook



Dry Goods Food Distribution

JOIN US IN MAKING A TANGIBLE IMPACT IN 2022

AN EXCITING LOOK AHEAD

We look forward to continuing in-person classes at The Azraq Education Center and finding a sense of routine after a trying year. After all, daily interactions with teachers and friends can make a tremendous difference for students. But we also know that recovering from the pandemic will take time. We will be paying close attention to our students' mental health as they grapple with the hardships they have faced early in their lives and over the past two years.

This year, we will also be placing a special emphasis on our teen students.

Teenagers continue to be a vulnerable and underserved population in South Azraq. Teenage boys often drop out of high school to work and provide meager funds for their families. Teenage girls likewise face barriers that keep them out of the classroom and will often marry young so as to be less of a burden on their families.

This Spring, we will open afternoon programming designed for teenagers. We will work with two groups: (1) those focused on high school graduation and preparing for the high school equivalency exam, Towjeehee, and (2) teens who are no longer in school or struggling academically, particularly teenage boys.

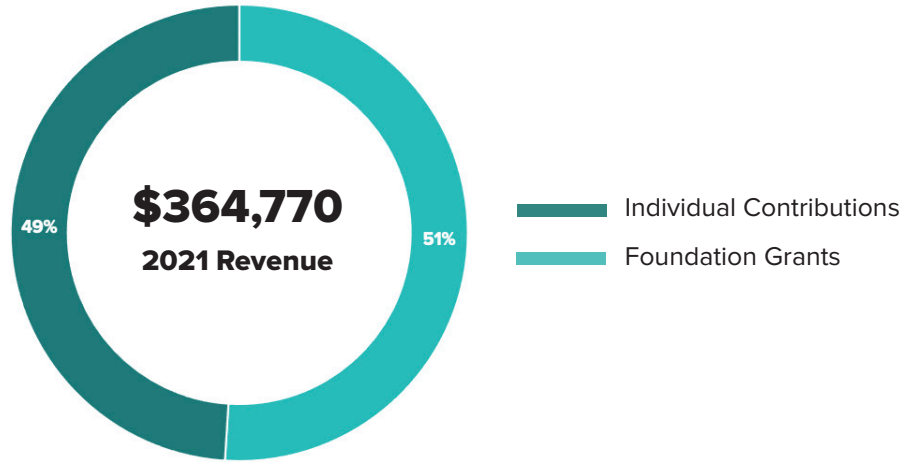
We hope to set up scholarship funds to encourage teens to pursue higher education or vocational programs, leveraging the critical academic skills they achieve by attending The Azraq Education Center.

In the face of the many challenges 2021 threw our way, we are truly inspired by the resilience of our community and by the overwhelming promise we see in each of our students. We cannot wait to accomplish more together in 2022!



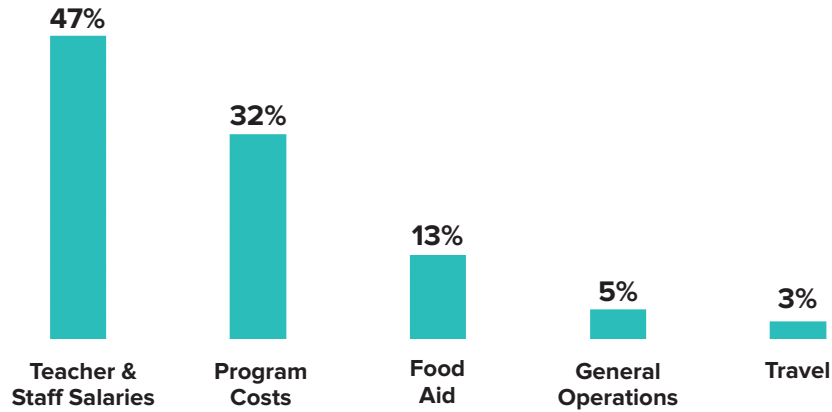
9th & 10th Grade Students

2021 REVENUE



2021 EXPENSE BREAKDOWN

In 2021, we spent **\$332,290** on the following:



NEW BUILDING CONSTRUCTION BUDGET

AECF received an additional restricted donation of **\$434,790** to construct the new Azraq Education Center building in 2021. We are so grateful for this transformational gift!



A FEMALE-LED TEAM

"I love our team spirit. I am proud of what we have been able to accomplish together and, most importantly, of the commitment we share to benefit our students." - Yusra Wala, Arabic Teacher

We are a proud female-led team based in the conservative town of South Azraq. The majority of our team members are Jordanian and Syrian women from the local community. They serve as incredible role models for our students and families, and prove what is possible when women are given the chance to lead.

MEET OUR LOCAL PARTNER

NACHMYAT EASTERN BADIA COOPERATIVE

We are grateful to work in close collaboration with our local Jordanian partner, Nachmyat Eastern Badia Cooperative. Nachmyat has served the community of South Azraq since the 1990s, when Azraq was a small town of 9,000. Today, executive director Nofa Al-Fayiz and her team of incredible women are working to strengthen a community that has doubled in size and is home to over 8,000 Syrian refugees – including 2,000 young children who have missed years of school.

AECF's work in South Azraq is made possible through a close working partnership with Nachmyat. Our organizations collaborate on programming for The Azraq Education Center and local emergency aid.



AECF & Nachmyat Leadership: Lexi, Nofa, Alia



Azraq Education Center Teachers:
Top: Anood, Haneen, Amira, Alia, Haneen, Lamees, Noor, Yusra
Bottom: Areej, Anwar, Sham, Manar, Amal



Operations Managers Wa'el & Suleiman



Rahaf, 15



Montessori Students



Manar, Grade 2 Teacher

AECF BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Lexi Shereshewsky | Executive Director & Board Member

Lexi Shereshewsky was inspired to start The Azraq Education and Community Fund after spending time living and studying in Damascus, Syria in 2009 and 2010. In addition to her role as Executive Director, Lexi is the Marketing Director for DailyMail.com. Lexi leads fundraising initiatives and works daily with AECF's team on the ground.

Martine Stilwell | Azraq Education Center Founder & Board Member

Martine Stilwell is a retired Psychiatrist and Physician based in Vancouver, Canada. Born in Holland, Martine lived in Australia, Tasmania, Indonesia, and Ecuador before ultimately settling in Canada. In 2014, after coming into an inheritance, Martine went to Jordan and helped found The Azraq Education Center. Martine plays an integral role in the management of the Azraq program and travels to Jordan multiple times per year.

Demetri Blaisdell | Chief of Business Affairs & Board Member

Demetri lived in Damascus, Syria from 2009-2010 before moving to New York to attend Columbia Law School. In addition to serving as Chief of Business Affairs at AECF, Demetri is a senior associate at the New York office of the law firm Boies Schiller Flexner LLP, where he specializes in complex commercial litigation.

Mary Murano | Development Director & Board Member

Mary Murano is a media executive with 25+ years experience in television content distribution and client relations. She has held leadership positions at NBCUniversal, Oxygen Media, Rainbow Media and Al Jazeera America. Mary brings her extensive business acumen to AECF where she helps liaise with grant-giving organizations and secure new funding opportunities.

Z. Joe Moosa | Key Stakeholder & Board Member

Joe is the President and CEO of Retirement Concepts Developments. Joe's record as an entrepreneur includes having founded, developed, and sold several companies to publicly traded organizations, including GE Capital. Joe co-founded Pacific Reach in 2014 as a real estate development and management company focusing on multi-family, commercial and hospitality markets. Joe and his wife Alina became involved in AECF in 2018 with the goal of helping expand the organization's activities and infrastructure.

Jerry Shereshewsky | Board Member

Jerry Shereshewsky brings over 45 years of experience in marketing and branding to AECF. He uses his extensive experience to help engage a wide network to support the organization's mission. Having spent time traveling in Syria in 2010, Jerry is committed to helping those affected by the conflict.

Ken Bernhard | Board Member

Ken Bernhard is a principal in Cohen and Wolf's Municipal, Business & Corporate, Real Estate, and Family Law Groups, representing municipalities, businesses, and individuals, in litigation, real estate, matrimonial and commercial matters. Ken is a passionate philanthropist and has volunteered around the world to support projects and promote education to those in need.

Yasir Dhannoon | Board Member

Yasir is an entrepreneur and project manager with expertise in technology and innovative solutions. He has created apps and digital platforms for global companies, including Harpercollins, Verizon, and General Mills. Yasir has a personal connection to AECF's mission after living in Syria for 3+ years as a refugee from Iraq.

OUR PARTNERS AND DONORS MAKE OUR WORK POSSIBLE

A special thank you to our major partners and significant 2021 donors:

- Joe and Alina Moosa
- The Blossom Hill Foundation
- The Dr. Scholl Foundation
- The Aegis Charitable Trust
- The Westport Sunrise Rotary Club
- The Skagit Rotary Club
- Tous Pour La Syrie
- Tariq and Asma Farid Foundation
- Helping Refugees Jordan (HRJ)
- Voices of the Children
- Paper Airplanes
- Ismael Akeel & ASAS Engineering
- Adnan Sakiri
- Sulejmon Mena
- Beryl Shereshewsky & her YouTube community
- Richard Segal & Family
- The Duggan Family
- Mary (Tana) Dryden & Family
- The Michaelson Family
- Phyllis and Cary Lemkowitz
- Urszula Konopacka
- Chris & Bev Sumpton
- Joumana Jaber
- Seham Alhusaini
- Catherine & Jerry Shereshewsky
- Cathleen & John Sullivan
- Simone Brumis & Bob Blaisdell
- Tahrim Haque
- David Barrett
- Annabel Grossman
- Evalyn Van Allen-Shalash
- The AECF Board of Directors
- **The hundreds of donors and volunteers across the U.S. and around the world!**





Amad, Faris & Khalaf, 10

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