

March 2014

# Under Siege

The devastating impact on children  
of three years of conflict in Syria

unite for  
children

unicef 



# Syria - a perilous place for children

For a child, three years can seem like a lifetime. Three years can transform a baby into a preschooler learning to read. Three years can see a young schoolchild grow into a teenager entering the exciting world of secondary school. Three years can turn an uncertain fifteen year-old into a proud young student on the first day of university.

But not for Syria's children. These past three years have been the longest of their lives so far. And for most, they have brought only loss and despair.

Today, they are living through the most damaging conflict for children in the region's recent history. More than 5.5 million Syrian children now see their future besieged by war. It is estimated there are up to one million children who live under siege and in hard-to-reach areas that UNICEF and other humanitarian partners cannot access on a regular basis.

This report takes stock of the impact that three years of violence and rights violations have had on children, whether those still inside the country, or those living as refugees outside its borders. It assesses the longer-term crisis facing the region, as the healthy and productive growth of millions of children is undermined by malnutrition and illness, loss of learning opportunities and the psychological impact of their traumatic wartime experiences. Above all, it warns that another year of conflict could cost far more than lives. Another year without education, without adequate support to overcome their psychological traumas, another year of

ill-health and stifled growth, another year of exposure to brutalizing violence will be another year too many for Syria's children. It will mean the irrevocable loss of the skills and understanding they will need as adults, to play their part in the reshaping of their nation and the restoration of stability to the region. Millions of young people risk becoming, in effect, a lost generation.

After three years of conflict and turmoil, Syria is now one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a child.

In their thousands, children have lost lives and limbs, along with virtually every aspect of their childhood. They have lost classrooms and teachers, brothers and sisters, friends, caregivers, homes and stability. Instead of learning and playing, many have been forced into the workplace, are being recruited to fight, or subjected to enforced idleness.

Child casualty rates are the highest recorded in any recent conflict in the region: while death and injury rates are difficult to measure, the UN conservatively estimates that at least 10,000 children have been killed. The real number is likely to be even higher.

The decline in Syrian children's access to education has been staggering. Today, nearly three million children in Syria and in neighbouring countries are unable to go to school on a regular basis. That's about half of Syria's school-age population.

*A young girl and her mother walk past destroyed buildings in the city of Maarat al-Numaan, Syria.*



Syria's social fabric is being systematically torn apart. An estimated three million buildings<sup>1</sup> have been destroyed, along with much of the country's critical infrastructure. More than six million people have been displaced inside the country, meaning that more than a third of all Syrian children are no longer living in their own homes<sup>2</sup> or communities.

For younger children, the experience of conflict has become so "normal" that their pre-war lives are a distant memory.

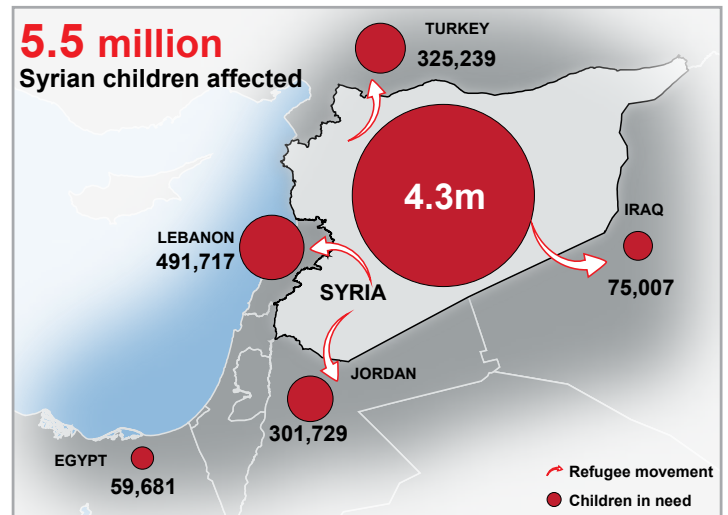
## Refugee children are suffering too

One in 10 children – over 1.2 million – have fled the country to become refugees in neighbouring countries. And these numbers are rising every day. By the end of January 2014, 37,498 Syrian children had been born as refugees.

Amid all this, children show tremendous courage, resilience and compassion. The words of individual children that punctuate this report are testament to that. Despite losing family members; despite physical injury; despite watching their homes and communities being destroyed; despite the unspoken fears they carry inside them, Syria's children still believe that they can recover their childhood dreams – and that their country can recover too.

Older children have taken the place of teachers, caregivers and counsellors for friends and younger siblings. Children in host communities have taken on the task of walking refugees to school and shielding them from bullies.

But this resilience and fortitude is not limitless. A narrow window of opportunity remains to protect this brutalized generation. Another year of conflict and suffering would likely push Syrian children beyond the point of no return. With every month that passes, their chances of recovering their stolen potential – and rebuilding their futures – dwindle.



*The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.*

## An accelerating crisis for children

Since March 2013, the number of children affected by the crisis has more than doubled from **2.3 million** to more than **5.5 million**.

The number of children displaced inside Syria has more than tripled from **920,000** to almost **3 million**.

The number of child refugees has more than quadrupled from **260,000** to more than **1.2 million**. Of these children, **425,000 are under the age of five**.

<sup>1</sup> Childhood Under Fire - The Impact of Two Years of Conflict in Syria: Save the Children, 2013  
<sup>2</sup> January 2014: The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates there are 4.2 million internally displaced inside Syria. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has registered a further 2.5 million refugees abroad. Of these, 50 per cent are children.

\* Some names in this report have been changed to protect identities.

# 1. Rights under siege

**When 14-month-old Ghina opened her eyes and made a sound, her father cried (see box). Her face was caked grey with a thick layer of dust, her little legs still trapped in the rubble of what had once been her bedroom before the bomb fell.**

Ghina is one of the lucky ones; she survived. As of January 2014, more than 10,000 children have lost their lives to Syria's violence<sup>3</sup>, reflecting a blatant disregard for civilian lives by all sides to the conflict. Most have reportedly died in the last 24 months<sup>4</sup>. And there is evidence that children are being directly targeted.

Witnesses have reported children and infants killed by snipers, victims of summary executions or torture<sup>5</sup>.

Based on global averages relating to armed conflict, tens of thousands of Syrian children could now be living with life-altering injuries due to the conflict<sup>6</sup>. Doctors on Syria's frontlines have reported treating significant numbers of amputations, spinal cord injuries, whole-body burns from incendiary weapons, as well as internal injuries from blasts and bullets which will result in permanent disabilities.

Few of these injuries receive the medical attention that they require. Six-year-old Safa suffered a serious leg injury when her home in Rural Damascus was bombed. The few remaining doctors there were unable to save the limb, or remove the shrapnel from her back. Today, after being carried out of Syria in her father's arms, Safa is being treated in Jordan's Za'atari refugee camp, and is learning to walk again on crutches.

## Innocence lost

The dangers for children go beyond death and injury. Boys as young as 12 have been recruited to support the fighting, some in actual combat, others to work as informers, guards, or arms smugglers. Two-thirds of Syrians surveyed in the most insecure governorates believe that child recruitment has accelerated<sup>7</sup>.

Families have also described how children are seized by armed forces from homes, schools, hospitals and checkpoints<sup>8</sup>. According to a recent UN report, children as young as 11 are being detained with adults. In some cases, they are being subjected to torture and sexual abuse to humiliate them, force confessions, or pressure relatives to surrender.

There have also been reports of child rape, including gang rape, and of children used as human shields – forced to the front lines to stand between tanks and fighters to dissuade enemies from attacking<sup>9</sup>. This detention and treatment of children violates conventions on child rights to which Syria is party – most notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Syria ratified in 1993.



*"The day our house was bombed I arrived home to find people digging in the rubble with their bare hands because they heard sounds coming from underneath," said Ghina's father. "They found Ghina's hands first and removed the dirt from her."*

*She started to move and rub her eyes. Apparently she had been unconscious. She was not crying. She was under one and a half metres of debris. Now she is recovered. But sometimes at night she bursts into tears for no reason."*



*Ghina as she is today*

<sup>3</sup> Report of the UN Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Security Council Report S/2014/31 14 January 2014

<sup>4</sup> Stolen Futures - The Hidden Toll of Child Casualties in Syria: Oxford Research Group, November 2013

<sup>5</sup> Report of the UN Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Security Council Report S/2014/31 14 January 2014

<sup>6</sup> Children in War (State of the World's Children 1996): UNICEF. Cites a 1:3 death to serious injury ratio for children in conflict, as a global average.

<sup>7</sup> Syria Child Protection Assessment 2013: Child Protection Working Group. 71 per cent of respondents said child recruitment in Syria was increasing.

<sup>8</sup> Safe No More - Students and Schools Under Attack in Syria: Human Rights Watch July 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Report of the UN Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Security Council Report S/2014/31 14 January 2014



## Too old too soon

Ahmed is just 14. But he is already working 13-hour days in a restaurant in northern Iraq. It shames and grieves his father to see his son work so hard. “My children used to go to school and now I’m seeing them killing themselves working, and coming home exhausted,” he says. “How do you think I feel?”

The Syria crisis is forcing children to grow up too soon – and exposing them to abuse and exploitation. Many have lost the family and community structures that should keep them safe. At least 8,000 children have arrived at Syria’s borders without their parents <sup>10</sup>.

One in ten refugee children is thought to be working – whether as cheap labour on farms, in cafes and car repair shops or as beggars on city streets <sup>11</sup>.

Single-parent households are more likely to use their children to work to bring in extra money. 15-year-old Salah and his brother work in a mine near Lebanon’s Beka’a Valley, to help their mother. “I didn’t use to work in Syria,” Salah says. “But I am working here because I need to help with the expenses. My brother is working too. We can’t go to school, so it’s better if we work.”



*“The work at the restaurant is okay. It’s not a problem, but I would love to have any opportunity to go back to Syria, I miss my school.”  
Ahmed, 14-years old.*

Fragile family circumstances mean that increasing numbers of Syrian girls are being forced into premature marriages. 16-year-old Manal was distraught when her father told her she had to leave school and marry an older man. “I felt (my father) was no longer supporting me. I told him I must continue learning.” But her father feared for her safety in the unfamiliar surroundings of the Za’atari refugee camp. He believed a husband would keep Manal safe should anything happen to him.

Manal was fortunate. An intervention from a UNICEF-supported NGO convinced her father to let her finish tenth grade – and as of today she is still in school. But many other young women caught up in the conflict are not so fortunate. Studies have shown an increase in the number of Syrian families pressing their daughters into early marriages either in the hope of offering protection or to help the family economically<sup>12</sup>. One in every five registered marriages of Syrian refugee women in Jordan is a girl under the age of 18.



*“My father said I have to marry. I felt he was no longer able to support me,” says Manal, 16.*

<sup>10</sup> Regional Response Plan for Syria Crisis, December 2013

<sup>11</sup> Based on UNICEF field team estimates

<sup>12</sup> Early Marriage Study (Preliminary Findings): UNICEF 2013.

## 2. Lives under siege



**Five-year-old Bara'a was found wandering alone in the streets of Homs during a brief humanitarian pause in the wartorn city in February 2014. A UNICEF worker at the scene managed to reunite the little girl with her father. It emerged that her mother had been killed by a mortar shell the day before the evacuation began.**

Five hundred children were brought out of Homs' besieged Old City during the brief ceasefire. For local people, after 18 months of near-constant violence and siege, it was a moment of intense if fleeting relief.

Latest estimates suggest that there are now one million children either living under siege or in areas of the country that are hard-to-reach because of intense violence. In Zahra and Nubul near Aleppo, and in Darayya, Moadamiyet Elsham, Yarmouk and Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, communities have been under siege for many months, prevented from receiving even food and medical supplies. The suffering of the families in these areas is largely unseen.

An even larger number of children live in various contested areas of the country, such as A-Raqqa, Deir az-Zour and Hassakeh where conflict and other factors make access to humanitarian assistance extremely difficult if not impossible. In rural eastern Aleppo, for example, 500,000 recently displaced people are currently trapped between their bombed homes and the Turkish border, with little or no assistance.

In such places, children are living in the rubble of their old neighbourhoods. Food is scarce, and the electricity supply is sporadic. Few children have any access to learning; families recently evacuated from Homs reported that most school buildings had been either damaged or turned into shelters, storage facilities or military bases.

In 2013, a British doctor, Dr. David Nott, was working in Aleppo's Old City. He reported treating heavily pregnant women and children who had been targeted by snipers while trying to move around the city. "They would start to arrive at eight in the morning," he said. "Children as young as two, with gunshot wounds to the head, neck and torso. Some of the pregnant women had been shot in the abdomen. I was told [by local medical staff] this was not unusual," Dr. Nott told UNICEF in an interview in February 2014.



*A war that claims even the unborn: X-ray image shows a dead foetus with a bullet lodged in its skull. Both the baby and its mother were killed by a sniper in Aleppo (September 2013).*

Women in areas under siege are at a higher risk of dying needlessly from complications in pregnancy – most likely due to anaemia or iron deficiency which can cause early delivery and haemorrhaging<sup>13</sup>. Without access to iron supplements and prenatal checks, without ambulances to get to hospitals and skilled emergency obstetric care, pregnancy in Syria's besieged areas can prove fatal for both mother and baby.

The despair of people living in besieged areas was summed up by a doctor, Dr. Mos'ab, who wrote to UNICEF on 16 February 2014 from a field hospital inside one of the besieged areas. He has worked there, he says, since 2011. He described people dying from festering wounds, malnutrition, bad water and lack of simple medicines. "We have to drink from polluted wells and wash in the sewage. We eat leaves and rotten rice. We have had no electricity for 500 days. We don't have baby milk. Our medical facilities lack basic sterile conditions, we must use a few expired medications. These are basic rights that we are lacking in the 21st century".

## Growth stifled

While the conditions inside areas that are under siege or otherwise inaccessible may be particularly extreme, the situation across the country as a whole is alarming. Doctors across Syria and neighbouring countries are reporting an increase in the number of severely malnourished and sick children arriving for treatment. UNICEF teams have visited paediatric wards in Damascus treating cases of malnutrition, including very young children on the brink of starvation. At one, a doctor who wished to remain anonymous told UNICEF, "We used to see one child with life-threatening malnutrition less than once per month. Now there are ten cases or more every week."

Malnutrition and dangerous vitamin and mineral deficiencies – so-called "hidden hunger" – have been slowly undermining children's ability to develop and thrive over the last three years. Today, there is good reason to fear a generational threat of irretrievable nutritional damage – particularly among very young children in their critical first 1,000 days of growth.

Malnutrition was a challenge to Syria even before the conflict – the number of stunted children – those too short for their age and whose brain may not properly develop – rose from 23 to 29 per cent between 2009 and 2011. Since then, violence has razed crops, killed local livestock and displaced farmers. Many communities that were once self-sufficient are finding it harder to grow or import food.

Inflation and rising unemployment has further undermined family diets. "Families used to be able to supplement basic food aid baskets with meat, fruit and vegetables," says Vilma Tyler, UNICEF nutrition specialist. "But by October 2013, the same

## Baby Khaled "back to life" after 20 days of treatment



Khaled was born just as Syria's pitiless conflict engulfed his neighborhood, the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk in the suburbs of Damascus. From birth he has lived under siege, a war child, trapped with his parents and four siblings.

Khaled would likely be dead had it not been for Dr. Ibrahim Mohammad, of UNRWA, who treated him for a severe form of malnutrition known as Kwashiorkor, caused by a prolonged lack of protein. "When I first saw Khaled he was 14-months-old, but he looked like a five-month-old", says Dr. Mohammad. "Khaled had survived on water and almost no solid food for two months. He was about to die."

"Hell is better than life in Yarmouk", his 29 year-old-mother, Zahra says. She was able to breastfeed Khaled when she gave birth, but gave up after two months due to the harsh conditions and lack of support. There were no other safe options available.

But, after just 20 days of nutritious food and medication Khaled has been transformed. His once-lifeless face now carries a smile, his swollen abdomen and limbs look healthy. He is one of the lucky ones.

*Story and photos courtesy of Chris Gunness, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)*

families told us they had run out of money. New mothers told us their breast milk had dried up because of extended stress. They were forced to dilute baby formula with unsafe drinking water just to make the powder last a little longer."

The impact of malnutrition is also being felt beyond Syria's borders. In Lebanon's Beka'a Valley, where many Syrian refugees live in crowded and insanitary informal settlements, the number of children with life-threatening levels of malnutrition jumped to nearly twice the average rate<sup>14</sup> in the past year.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with UNICEF nutrition specialist

<sup>14</sup> Joint Nutrition Assessment - Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, 2013



Many children crossing Syria's borders are already malnourished. Their bodies are unready for the hardships – poverty, poor living conditions and rudimentary diets – that await them as refugees. Those who manage to enroll in school find that they can't concentrate on their lessons. In his camp on the Turkish-Syrian border, twelve year-old Mohammed says he eats little more than biscuits, and often feels weak and cold. "We need lots of things here," he said. "But mostly we need better food."

## Health in retreat

Three years of displacement and collapsing health services have left Syria's children highly vulnerable to potentially fatal diseases such as measles. Besides the re-emergence of polio after a 14-year absence, (see box page 9) doctors report an increase in the number and severity of diseases such as pneumonia and diarrhoea<sup>15</sup>.

The extent of the damage to the health infrastructure is startling. An estimated 60 per cent of Syrian hospitals have been destroyed or damaged<sup>16</sup>. Seventy per cent of health centres in A-Raqqqa, Deir Ezour and Homs are either damaged or out of service<sup>17</sup>. Fewer than a third of public ambulances and health centres still function, while pharmacies lack basic medicines. Immunization rates across the country have fallen from 99 percent pre-war to just 52 per cent in 2012<sup>18</sup>.

Sick children needing specialized treatment are at particular risk. 15 year-old Sheendar remembers how his family searched fruitlessly in Syria for medicines and transfusion facilities to treat his blood disease. "We looked everywhere," he said. Now living in northern Iraq, he is getting the care he needs – but at the price of abandoning his family home.

Many of Syria's first responders and emergency room medics have fled the country, with 127 reported killed and 111 injured<sup>19</sup>. Doctors have left too.

The implications for public health are equally severe when it comes to Syria's collapsing water and sanitation networks. More than a third of water treatment plants have been destroyed; by the end of 2012, the amount of safe water consumed by families across Syria fell 40 per cent from pre-crisis levels<sup>20</sup>, thereby becoming an important contributing factor to the spread of disease. A child in Deir Ezzour now has just a 10 per cent chance of receiving safe piped water – compared to 80 per cent for a child in Damascus. Only a third of the country's sewage is now being treated, compared to 70 per cent before the conflict.

Syrians living outside the country as refugees – especially those living in Lebanon's informal tented settlements – are equally vulnerable to bad water and contaminated environments. And their difficulties are becoming more acute. Low rainfall over the recent winter has left the region facing a potential drought. Weakened water systems will be hard-pressed to cope in a region that is already among the most water-stressed in the world.



*Sheendar was unable to find the medicine he needed inside Syria.*

<sup>15</sup> Syria Humanitarian Assistance and Response Plan (SHARP) 5, 2014

<sup>16</sup> Open Letter to the Lancet – Let Us Treat Patients in Syria: Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, Professor Eliza Glinka, Professor Harald zur Hausen & Dr. Roberto Luiz a'Avila, 13 September 2013

<sup>17</sup> Syria Humanitarian Assistance and Response Plan (SHARP) 5, 2014

<sup>18</sup> UNICEF and WHO Polio Response Strategy, November 2013

<sup>19</sup> Report to the UN Human Rights Council of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic: February 2013

<sup>20</sup> Rapid WASH Needs Assessment in Syria, January 2013





### October 2013: Polio returns to Syria

Since the confirmation of a polio outbreak in the governorate of Deir Ezzour in October 2013, 25 cases of the disease have been confirmed in the north and east of the country. In response, the biggest immunization campaign in the region's history was launched by UNICEF, WHO and the respective ministries of health in seven countries. As a result, over the past four months, 2.7 million Syrian children have been immunized through four campaign rounds inside Syria, alongside 23 million others in the region. Despite the challenges of the ongoing conflict, vaccination teams were able to reach children behind Syria's frontlines, in temporary shelters and in communities hosting refugees. Yet polio remains a threat, especially to an estimated 323,000 children under the age of five in areas under siege or that are hard-to-reach.

*A child receives a dose of oral polio vaccine at a maternal and child primary health centre in Jordan.*



## Impact on host communities

As the war drags on, the siege on childhood in Syria is steadily encircling the lives of non-Syrian children in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey.

Across the region, communities hosting Syrian refugees (mostly very poor themselves) are at a tipping point. The foundations of their own development – schooling, healthcare, nutrition and stability - are starting to crumble as the influx of refugees overwhelms them.

Syria's regional neighbours have made tremendous efforts to welcome the flood of refugees and provide them with shelter and services, working with local and international humanitarian organizations.

The influx of thousands of refugee families has pushed up demand for already scarce supplies of electricity and water (by up to 100 per cent in some areas). Rents are rising - by 300 per cent in some parts of Jordan - as is the competition for low-paid jobs<sup>21</sup>. The World Bank estimates that in Lebanon, 170,000 local people are currently being pushed into poverty by the Syrian crisis<sup>22</sup>.

Too often, the non-Syrian children of this conflict feel overlooked. Community leaders and families in areas hosting Syrian refugees complain that aid is allocated to Syrian families while their own standard of living falls.

These rising tensions exacerbate children's sense of vulnerability and make it harder for them to adapt to their new surroundings. Failure to address the issue could put the longer-term stability of some communities at risk, as the conflict and displacement continue.

The plight of tens of thousands of non-Syrians who have long lived as refugees inside Syria is equally grave. At least half of Syria's 500,000 Palestinian refugees have now been displaced for the second or third time.

<sup>21</sup> National Resilience Plan for Jordan, 2014

<sup>22</sup> Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact of the Syria Crisis, World Bank September 2013



### 3. Minds and hearts under siege

#### Hidden pain

Ten-year-old Fatima, a refugee in Jordan, gives the impression of being determined and self-assured. “No, let me speak for myself,” she tells her mother when the older woman tries to describe her daughter’s feelings. But when Fatima starts to remember, her voice drops and her eyes lose focus.

“Sometimes I dream,” she says. “I dream I am carrying a dead man. And when I look at the children living here, I feel like they have lost their hearts.”

Every child touched by this conflict has experienced things no child should. And for most, the deepest wounds are invisible.

Four-year-old Adnan, sheltering with his family in Lebanon, carries his pain both inside and out. His face is scarred by the fire that burned him when his house was bombed. Now he sits motionless on his mother’s lap. “He cries all night,” she says. “He is scared of everything. He feels hopeless when we leave him, even for a second. Anytime someone outside the family approaches him he is afraid.”

Nearly a third of displaced children in Za’atari refugee camp still live in fear that they might be bombed, kidnapped or killed<sup>23</sup>. “We get flashbacks,” Kinana, a mother of six says. “My children see weapons and can label them. They know the names of each weapon, because they’ve seen so many.”

For such children, fear has become a way of life<sup>24</sup>. Unremitting anxiety and exposure to violence has undermined their normal social development. In some cases, their psychological growth has stopped or even been reversed. In places where the conflict has been most intense – including Aleppo, Homs and Rural Damascus – 98 per cent of inhabitants report a profound deterioration in their children’s wellbeing<sup>25</sup>.

The parents of younger children report symptoms of deep distress, including sleep disturbances, crying and screaming, bed-wetting, nightmares, clinginess and withdrawal. “I dream that someone is coming to kill me, to eat me,” little Marwan, says. “So I decide to keep my eyes closed, and stay inside, so nothing bad will come.”

*Fatima and her parents live in a single room on the roof of a building in Mafraq, Jordan.*



<sup>23</sup> No Lost Generation Strategic Overview, January 2014

<sup>24</sup> Child Rights Situation Analysis: War Child Holland January 2014

<sup>25</sup> Syria Child Protection Assessment: Global Child Protection Working Group, 2013



*12-year old Safaa cries as she tells a UNICEF aid worker about her family's harrowing journey from their home in Syria, to the Kawergosk refugee camp in Iraq.*

"Many Syrian children are in pure survival mode", says UNICEF child protection specialist Jane MacPhail, who spends her days working with child refugees in Jordan. "They have seen the most terrible things and forget normal social and emotional responses. One little boy who came across the border with his parents had stopped speaking entirely. But after spending time at a UNICEF supported child-friendly space – one day, he started to speak again. Everyone was amazed, and moved – most of all, his parents. They thought they would never hear his voice again."

Older children and teenagers are struggling in different ways. A survey of children in Za'atari refugee camp found that a third of all children displayed aggressive behaviour and self-harm. Girls are more likely than boys to admit to difficult emotions (74 per cent of girls compared to 46 per cent of boys)<sup>26</sup>.

Family violence is on the rise, with refugee children listing it as a key concern during interviews with child protection specialists. Some report being bullied by other Syrians or by local children<sup>27</sup>. School drop-out rates are higher for older children, many of whom are living with intense feelings of frustration, shame and rage at the chaos around them. These children are at risk of drifting into crime, addiction and violence. Parents speak of their concern that teenagers are slipping out of control and that criminal gangs are recruiting them for money<sup>28</sup>.

Evidence suggests that some young people are being encouraged to join armed groups following the death of family members. Political mobilization by fighting factions and peer pressure from families and communities combine to make boys feel that it is their duty to fight<sup>29</sup>.

Children in distress instinctively look to their families for comfort. But family coping mechanisms are wearing thin. Parents lack jobs, money and their own support networks. They are dealing with their own stresses - trying to keep their families safe, housed and fed or navigating the many challenges refugees face<sup>30</sup>.

A third of refugee children in Lebanon and Jordan only leave their shelters once a week<sup>31</sup>. Lack of safe spaces to play - to simply be children together – is a constant source of frustration.

Fatima, a bright girl of ten, speaks for many when she describes the intense sadness of her new isolation. Once an active school-child, she now spends all day with her parents on a bare rooftop in Amman, playing with two dolls.

Despite all they have suffered, Syria's children still find reason for hope. Most cherish a belief that one day they will return to a peaceful Syria, to re-ignite old friendships and revive old dreams. But their resilience is being tested to the limit by the lack of opportunities around them and the fears they cry.

<sup>26</sup> Mental Health/Psychosocial and Child Protection for Syrian Refugee Adolescents in Za'atari refugee camp, International Medical Corps and UNICEF July 2013

<sup>27</sup> Data on enrollment and school drop out rates from Ministries of Education in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

<sup>28</sup> Mental Health/Psychosocial and Child Protection for Syrian Refugee Adolescents in Za'atari refugee camp, International Medical Corps and UNICEF July 2013

<sup>29</sup> Syria Crisis: Education Interrupted. UNICEF and partners December 2013

<sup>30</sup> Education Rapid Needs Assessment For Displaced Syrian Children in Schools, Communities and Safe Spaces: UNICEF Lebanon and Save the Children, July 2012.

<sup>31</sup> The Future of Syria – Refugee Children in Crisis: UNHCR November 2013



## Looking back with sorrow

Some of Syria's displaced youth have already passed the point of caring about their futures. Some talk about returning to Syria to fight – searching for a sense of purpose<sup>32</sup>. Instead of looking forward to a future of change and development as normal teenagers would.

The trap of anguish, sorrow and futility is claiming a whole generation of young Syrians. They sense that their future is under siege.

The past three years has left too many with deep developmental and emotional scars. These will affect their ability to become healthy and emotionally balanced adults, as surely as any physical injury. Invisible wounds are undermining the capacity of tomorrow's parents, teachers and leaders. This could carry grave long-term implications for the entire region, undermining the foundations on which strong societies are built.



*A drawing by Angham, a 14-year old girl, during a UNICEF-supported psychosocial activity at the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan.*

<sup>32</sup> Syrian Refugee Children in Jordan – A Desk Review of Assessments: UNICEF 2013

## Losing out on school

"I used to want to be a teacher," Hassan says, as he tends a fire outside his family's tent in Lebanon's Beka'a valley. "But where are the schools to learn or teach in now?"

Many Syrian families are still in shock at the collapse of an education system that was once the envy of the region. Prior to the conflict, primary school enrollment had been almost universal for a generation, literacy rates were over 90 per cent and Syria was spending almost 5 per cent of its annual GDP on national learning<sup>33</sup>.

But in just three years this investment has been largely wiped out. A fifth of all Syria's schools have been destroyed, damaged, turned into shelters, or taken over by armed groups and forces. Many teachers no longer report for work. Nearly 3 million children in Syria and neighbouring countries—half of those who should be in school—are now missing from the classroom<sup>34</sup>.

Shaza, 15, used to live in Aleppo. "Many buildings, including schools, were attacked and burned down. Children were not allowed to walk outside freely since many snipers were shooting every day. Security was getting worse day by day, and violence was part of our daily life."<sup>35</sup>

For Syrian refugee children, learning opportunities are just as scarce. Half of Syria's refugee schoolchildren are not in school<sup>36</sup>. Children fight for space in over-crowded classrooms while their families struggle to cover the cost of books, tuition and transportation.

School pupils can also be deterred by an unfamiliar curriculum and classes taught in languages they barely understand.

Iman and her children have fled to Iraq's Kurdistan region, where schools teach in Kurdish rather than Arabic. "They open their books and realise they don't understand," she says. Outside refugee camps in Iraq, hardly any Syrian children attend school.

There are other challenges too. Refugee families may not have the right papers to enroll their children in schools that—in many cases—are located long kilometres away. Poor diets mean many children arrive to class hungry, and unable to concentrate properly. Older refugee students discover that their new school certificates could have no value back home in Syria, deepening fears for their careers and futures.

Some children are simply being left behind. "I wanted to be a doctor before," eight year-old Jumana, now living in Turkey, told us. But after three years out of school because of the conflict, she has almost no hope of catching up again. Now she collects rubbish for US\$4 a day.

*Two girls do their homework outside their tented home in the Kawergosk camp for Syrian refugees, near Erbil, Iraq.*

33 World Bank data; spending on public education as a % of GDP 2004-2008 & 2009 onwards;

34 Syria Crisis : Education Interrupted, UNICEF, World Vision, UNHCR, Save the Children, December 2013

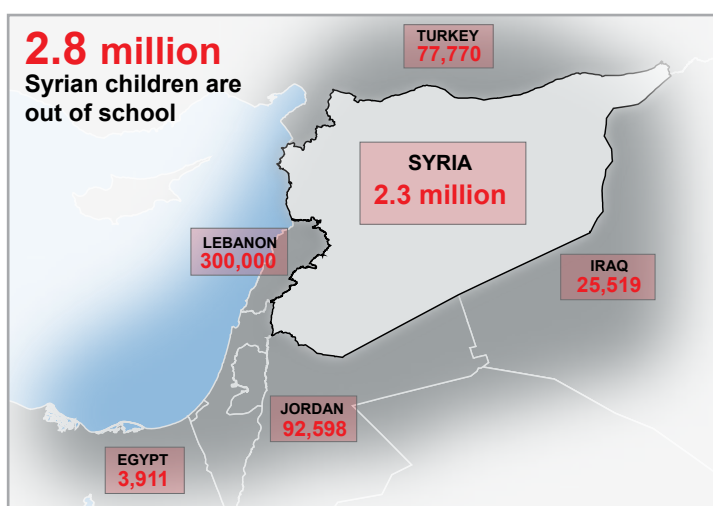
35 UNICEF Emergency school supplies promote learning amid an education crisis, in the Syrian Arab Republic, [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/syria\\_70746.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/syria_70746.html)

36 Syria - Education Interrupted: UNICEF, 13 December 2013





Boys study at a UNICEF-supported tent school in the Kawergosk refugee camp near Erbil, Iraq.



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Providing sufficient learning opportunities for the swelling numbers of host community and refugee children will be a daunting prospect. Aid organisations plan to help the government to provide education for nearly 435,000 school-age children in Lebanon – more than the number of Lebanese children currently enrolled in public schools. In Jordan, should the influx of refugees continue, education partners will need to educate one Syrian child for every five Jordanian children. And in Turkey, if current trends continue, the number of refugee schoolchildren could reach over 500,000<sup>37</sup>.

37 Syria Crisis: Education Interrupted. UNICEF and partners December 2013

# Make this the last year of suffering

**The children of Syria cannot afford another year of conflict: Make this the last year that Syrian children have to suffer.**

Despite all the suffering and pain, children have shown an astonishing ability and will to recover and heal.

Children keep asking to go back to school, so that they can one day return home and help rebuild their country.

Syria's children - the children of today's war - are tomorrow's leaders.

They need our support to grow, learn, and develop the skills that will rebuild their war-ravaged country and restore its diverse and multicultural society.

**But time is fast running out. The coming months are our last chance to save a generation that will otherwise be lost.**

That's why the following critical measures for children need to be taken by the global community.

## 1. End the vicious cycle of violence in Syria now

Syria's children and their families have suffered far too much. As soon as possible, they must be given the chance to return home to a safe environment free from the threat of violence, fear, exploitation and abuse. They need to be able to resume their schooling, and enjoy the opportunity to play with their peers and live in a secure and healthy environment.

## 2. Grant immediate access to the under-reached 1 million children

Parties to the conflict in Syria must immediately allow UNICEF and other humanitarian agencies to deliver vitally needed assistance to children living in areas under siege and in hard-to-reach areas. Polio vaccine, water purification tablets, hygiene supplies and other services are critically needed.

## 3. Create a protective environment for children

Children must never be targeted or recruited to take any part in the conflict. Nor should they be exploited sexually, physically or emotionally. Protecting children, their schools, playgrounds and health centres is a binding obligation for the parties to the conflict. Mechanisms already in place to monitor violations of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law must be reinforced and supported.

## 4. Invest in children's education

UNICEF is seeking US\$276 million in funds for its education work - double the amount of last year. These funds will increase the number of children in schools, expand learning spaces and classrooms, and provide more trained teachers, books and other learning materials, thereby helping preserve the potential of a whole generation of Syrian children.

## 5. Help children's inner healing

Millions of children need psychological support to heal the hidden wounds inflicted by the conflict. In 2014, UNICEF needs \$US110 million to train teachers, community leaders, and health and protection workers, while improving monitoring and referral mechanisms for children suffering the worst traumas. The funds will also allow the expansion of Child-Friendly Spaces where children can begin to heal through sports, arts, and creative writing.

## 6. Provide support to host communities and governments

Syrian refugees are overwhelmingly settling in poor communities, adding to the strain on already over-burdened health, education, water and hygiene services. Extra commitment and funds are needed to alleviate tensions and foster stronger bonds between refugees and those hosting them. Providing support to children's services will have a doubly positive impact – improving living conditions for Syrians and poor local children alike, while also reinforcing government and community efforts to promote coexistence and tolerance between their own populations and Syrian refugees.

The **No Lost Generation** strategy proposes practical ways to address the harsh reality that a generation of Syrian children is being shaped by violence, displacement, and a persistent lack of opportunity – and could be lost forever, with profound long-term consequences for Syria, the region, and beyond.

The \$1 billion strategy focuses on programmes that, in partnership with governments and local communities, can deliver safe education, protection from exploitation, abuse and violence, psychological care and support and offer more opportunities for social cohesion and stability in an already volatile region. These programmes include strengthening national and community-based child protection systems.

The initiative will also scale up access to quality education, through formal and non-formal approaches, introducing accelerated curricula for children who have been out of school, vocational training, training of teachers and incentive programmes, creating safe environments that further reduce children's exposure to further risks.

Inside Syria, safe access to education for school-age children and adolescents who are internally displaced is absolutely critical. The "No Lost Generation" initiative will provide remedial education and psychosocial support organized in school clubs for pre-schoolers and other out-of-school children.



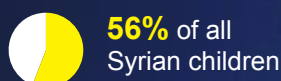


*A young girl at a UNICEF-supported child-friendly space, Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan*

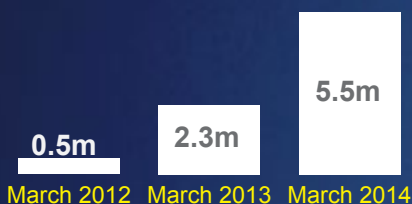
# 5.5 million children

are in need of humanitarian assistance

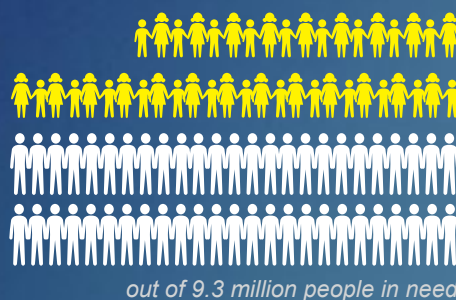
## The Syria crisis in numbers



The number doubled in one year



**4.3 million**  
inside Syria



**1.2 million**  
child refugees



**10,000+**  
lost their lives in the conflict



**37,498**  
babies born as refugees

2011 2012 2013



**nearly 3 million**  
are out of school



**323,000**  
children under 5 in besieged or hard to access areas



**8,000+**  
children arrived at Syria's borders without their parents



**4,072**  
schools destroyed or used as shelters



Two boys make their way home after school in the Za'atari camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan.



## UNICEF response

Key figures in 2013

## The Syria crisis in numbers



### Syria



**10 million** people provided with access to drinking & domestic water



**291,678** children enrolled in learning programmes



**2.3 million** children vaccinated against polio and **2 million** against measles



**491,488** children benefited from psychosocial support



### Lebanon



**66,303** people provided with access to drinking & domestic water



**66,679** children enrolled in learning programmes



**580,770** children vaccinated against polio and **711,012** against measles



**296,760** children benefited from psychosocial support



### Jordan



**172,884** people provided with access to drinking & domestic water



**108,046** children enrolled in learning programmes



**1.1 million** children vaccinated against polio and **4 million** against measles



**128,809** children benefited from psychosocial support



### Iraq



**104,259** people provided with access to drinking & domestic water



**20,645** children enrolled in learning programmes



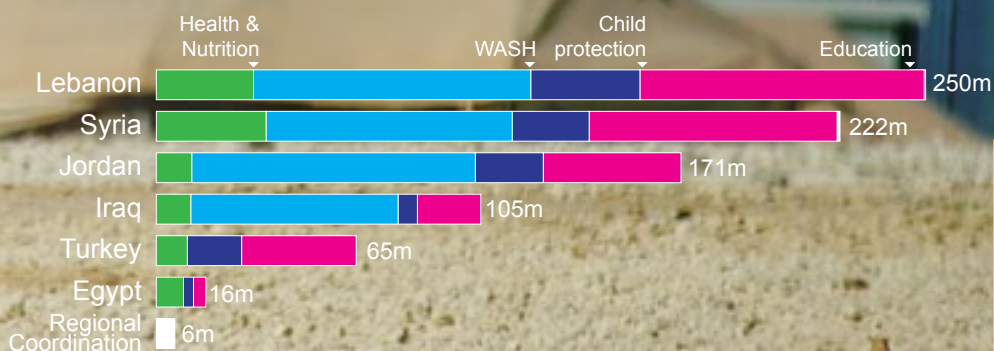
**5.1 million** children vaccinated against polio and **46,637** against measles



**11,269** children benefited from psychosocial support

## Funding

Requirements for 2014(US\$)



UNICEF's plans are only



**8%**

funded

**Cover Photo:**

Nine-year-old Alladin collects used ammunition to sell as scrap metal in Aleppo, Syria, January 2013.

© NICLAS HAMMARSTRÖM

**For further information, please contact:****Simon Ingram**

Regional Chief of Communication

+962 79 590 4740

Email: [singram@unicef.org](mailto:singram@unicef.org)

**Juliette Touma**

Regional Communication Specialist for Syria Crisis

+962 79 867 4628

Email: [jtouma@unicef.org](mailto:jtouma@unicef.org)

United Nations Children's Fund

Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa

P.O. Box 1551

Amman 11821

Jordan

[www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org) / [www.childrenofsyria.info](http://www.childrenofsyria.info) / [Facebook.com/UNICEFmena](https://www.facebook.com/UNICEFmena) / [Twitter.com/UNICEFmena](https://twitter.com/UNICEFmena)

unite for  
children

