

# Syria Crisis: Education Interrupted

Global action to rescue the schooling of a generation



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A boy at a UNICEF-supported school in Za'atari camp for Syrian refugees, Jordan.

*"I used to have a dream, but it's been blown away by the winds of this place. My dream was to go to university and study pharmacy. It was on my mind and in my heart, but it's been reduced to ash."*

**Heba, 17, Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan**



*Ghazele is 10 years old. She fled with her mother, father, sister and two brothers from the fighting in Syria. They crossed the border illegally in 2012 bringing a few belongings.*

## Learning in free fall

The conflict in Syria is entering its fourth year. Every day the crisis is prolonged, the pain endured by innocent families grows – leaving deep scars that are likely to disfigure the Middle East and beyond for years to come.

A region that has suffered more than its share of conflict and displacement is once again wracked by violence, economic hardship and a vast weight of human suffering. Most affected of all are Syria's children: more than 5 million young lives are at risk of becoming a "lost generation".

This paper focuses on the havoc being wreaked on these children's hopes of an education – and the likely consequences for the region's future. It outlines the long-term impact of the collapse in school enrolment inside Syria, the transformation of schools from safe spaces to places of danger, and the heavy burden that more than a million young refugees is placing on school systems in neighbouring countries.

We argue that even among the many challenges facing Syria's children, ensuring their continued access to learning is an essential platform for protection, social stabilization and economic recovery, and one the world cannot ignore.

We present four key recommendations to be undertaken by regional governments and their international partners to safeguard Syrian children's fundamental right to quality education.

If the opportunity is missed, the likely outcome -- a sharp rise in the proportion of uneducated youth -- will perpetuate the costs of conflict for decades to come. Every Syrian child out of school is a lifetime's potential under threat.

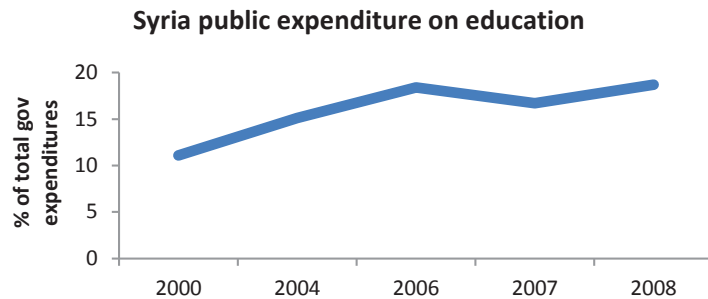
Only immediate and concerted action can stop that from happening.

## When we used to go to school

*"I liked school back in Syria," says 17-year-old Hanan who lives in Zata'ari refugee camp in Jordan. "We liked the teachers and the curriculum was good. We were with people we loved. I remember that it was very strict with firm rules, but it was important to me because I wanted to be a journalist."*

Before the crisis began in March 2011, Syria could point to a healthy record in basic education. An estimated 97 per cent of primary-age children were attending school, as were 67 per cent of secondary-age children. Literacy rates country-wide were high, at over 90 per cent for both men and women<sup>1</sup>. In fact, Syria's literacy rates surpassed the regional average – on a par with those of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and higher than Iraq and Egypt.

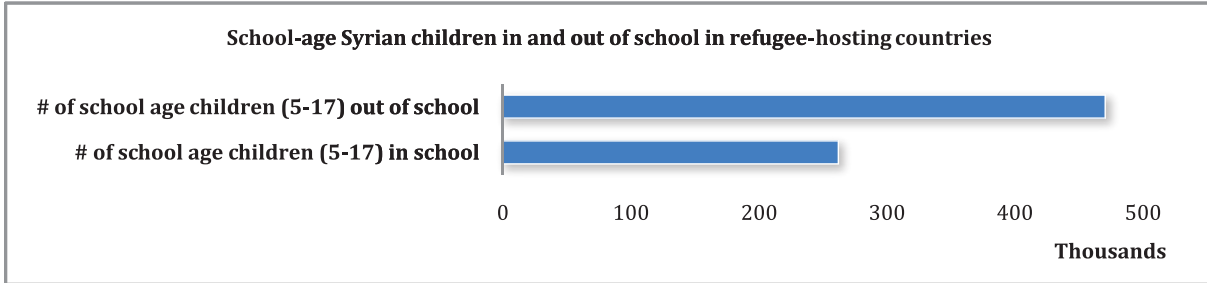
Syria's national investment in education had also been rising steadily. The Government's education budget increased from 15 to 19 per cent<sup>2</sup> of GDP between 2004 and 2009.



A boy writes in class at a UNICEF-supported school in Za'atari camp for Syrian refugees, Jordan.

## Learning amid the conflict

Nearly three years of brutal conflict in Syria have reversed more than a decade of progress in children’s education. There are today 4.8 million Syrian children of school age. Inside Syria, 2.2 million of them are not in school, while more than half a million refugee children are not in school outside Syria. The numbers are rising by the day.<sup>3</sup>



The collapse in education has been most profound in areas hit hardest by violence. In Al-Raqqqa, Idlib, Aleppo, Deir Azzour, Hama and Darra’a less than half of all children today attend school. Idlib and Aleppo have lost a quarter and a sixth of their schools respectively – with attendance plunging below 30 per cent. Overall, since the war began, more than 4,000 Syrian schools have been destroyed, damaged or turned into shelters for displaced people.



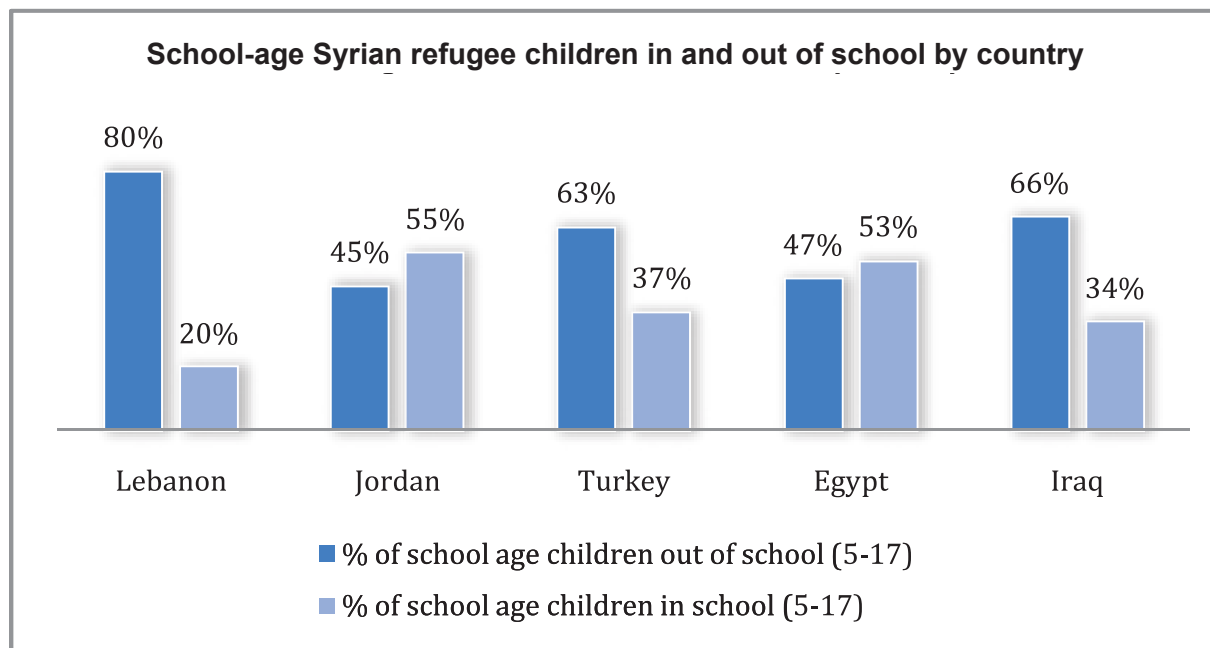
Syrian refugee children learn in a makeshift tent classroom in the Kfarzabat informal settlement in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. A lack of space and the use of English and French are two main challenges in integrating them into Lebanese schools.

What remains of Syria’s education system bears little resemblance to pre-crisis conditions. In some communities, existing schools cannot adequately accommodate new students who have been displaced from other parts of the country, leaving classrooms overcrowded and an insufficient supply of books, desks and sanitation facilities. Moreover, in some areas there are not enough teachers as many have fled their communities due to conflict.

Schools should be safe havens, places where children can feel safe from the conflict around them. Yet over the course of the crisis in Syria, schoolchildren as young as ten have described being arrested or detained on the way to school, targeted by snipers, or caught in the crossfire between warring parties. Some have seen their schools turned into battlegrounds, reduced to rubble, or converted to shelters for the displaced. Many children have witnessed horrific scenes of violence; some have seen classmates and teachers killed in front of their own eyes.

The right to a quality education, as established under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is being violated daily and on an appalling scale<sup>4</sup>. If Syria’s children are risking their lives just to go to school it is little wonder more Syrian parents are choosing to keep their children at home.

More than 1.2 million children have fled to neighbouring countries. While they have found sanctuary from the violence in Syria, they nevertheless face barriers to continuing their education. School enrolment rates among Syrian refugees are now lower than those found in Afghanistan, a country with a much longer history of conflict and deep levels of poverty. Two thirds of Syrian refugee schoolchildren are out of school today, despite a massive effort from host-country governments, civil society, NGOs and UN organizations. Official enrolment rates among Syrian refugee children stand at just 34 per cent region-wide, meaning that between 500,000 and 600,000 children have no access to learning<sup>5</sup>. The real number may be much higher, however, as this figure only accounts for registered refugees not in schools.



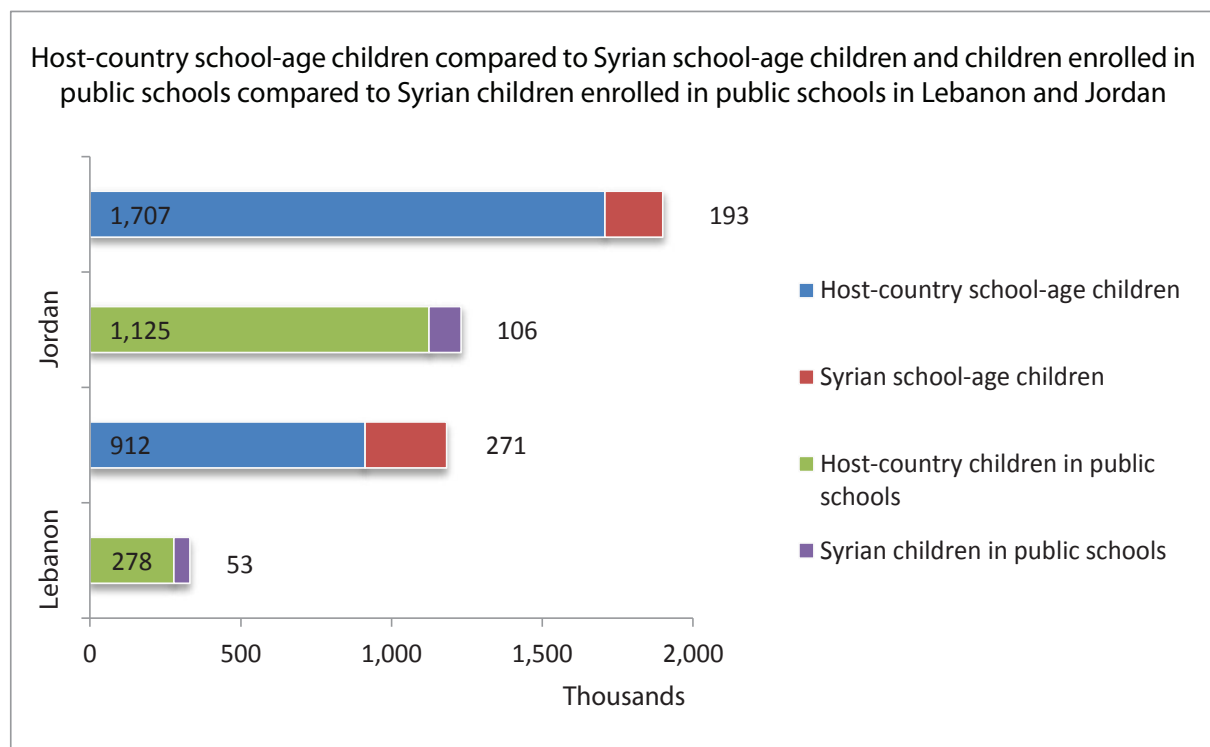
Countries hosting refugees are doing what they can to expand the capacity of national education systems to accommodate the massive influx of Syrian children. Jordan and Egypt have created space in their schools for nearly half of registered Syrian refugee children, while Turkey is educating one third of registered refugee children. Lebanon, which hosts the greatest number of Syrian refugees, is struggling to lift current enrolment rates for Syrian children of 20 per cent or lower<sup>6</sup>.

The regional effort to include more Syrian children in schools is buckling under the sheer weight of numbers. Host-country public school systems simply cannot cope with the unprecedented needs – which show no sign of slowing. Lebanon and Jordan are under the greatest pressure. Today, one out of every four school-age children in Lebanon is from Syria. In Jordan, the figure is approaching one in ten<sup>7</sup>. Without much more support from the international community, accommodating all of the new students into existing public schools will be a near impossible task.

*Wafa and her ten year old daughter, Cibara, live in Kawergosk refugee camp in Iraq. Cibara, who is deaf and mute, was a keen student in Syria, with ambitions to become a teacher of children with special needs. Now she has been out of school for more than two years. When she tries to write her English alphabet she can only get to the letter 'C'. "She's so bright," says Wafa. "But she forgot. She is always asking me – where is my copybook, and where is my pen? Didn't I used to go to school in Damascus? My other daughter is crying every day too. She even wants to go back to Syria, back to war, just because she wants her school back."*

The growing strain on school facilities is adding to the tension between Syrian refugees and the communities hosting them. In the poorest towns and villages where refugees now live, poverty is deepening and the patience of host communities is wearing thin.

Syrian refugee children able to enrol in the public schools of host communities face other challenges. The experience of being taught in an unfamiliar language, disparities in curricula and a sense of isolation are all contributing to high dropout rates.



(Source: UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2012 and UNICEF)

## A challenge that can only grow

The task of providing an education to Syria's children is becoming ever more daunting as the numbers of children and families displaced by the conflict increase.

Jordan is expecting a 40 per cent rise in the number of Syrian schoolchildren by the end of 2014. Lebanon could see the number of Syrian schoolchildren it is hosting more than double over the same period – up to 700,000.

In Iraq, the number of Syrian school-aged children is expected to grow by 93 per cent to 168,000 by the end of 2014. Turkey is projecting a rise that is almost as dramatic over the coming year – potentially increasing its Syrian school-age population to more than 516,000, an increase of 85 per cent over today's figures.

These projections are based on UN planning figures for 2014. It is impossible to say how they will be shaped -- for better or worse -- by events over the coming year.



Two boys sell cooked corn near destroyed buildings in the city of Idlib, Syria.

## Recommendations for global action

*"The crisis has caused a massive break in our children's education. This project is an opportunity for them to regain their self-esteem and hope for the future."*

*Khleif al-Muglat, former education official in Hama governorate and now an assistant in a UNICEF-supported informal school project near Zahle, Lebanon.*

Education has the power to make a real and lasting difference to young lives who have suffered through Syria's conflict. Each day in school stabilizes lives and communities, spurs growth, and provides hope and purpose in fundamental ways. Through education, a generation of children can access protective environments, acquire knowledge and skills for the future, and contribute to peacebuilding.

When peace comes, children will be the ones to lead their communities towards a brighter future – a task they can only shoulder if they have been able to continue their education.

To make this happen, urgent global action must be taken to safeguard the fundamental right of Syrian children to quality education. The same must apply to children in the equally vulnerable communities that are hosting them. Regional governments and their international partners can begin to address this situation by acting on **four key recommendations**:



**1. Long-term planning for the education of displaced Syrian children:** Regional governments and international partners must plan for a future which meets the education needs of Syrian refugee children over the long term. Host governments must be supported in the development and implementation of innovative education policies and models that reflect the presence of Syrian children as an enduring reality. This should include helping local and refugee children to learn comfortably together and exploring transferrable certification of schooling for refugee students.

**2. Host countries must be supported and international investment doubled:** Long-term solutions of the scale needed cannot be implemented at current levels of funding. International appeals for the Syria crisis this year are only 62 per cent funded, leaving a US\$ 2.6 billion gap. Only 67 per cent of UNICEF's 2013 appeal for education needs inside Syria and the sub-region have been met. International partners must support host governments' efforts to expand and improve learning spaces, recruit additional teachers and slash the costs of getting children into the classroom – including transport, school materials and funds for extra teaching shifts. Investment is also needed in education for children with disabilities, and vocational training for older children - all of which will help children from host communities as well as refugee children.

**3. Scale-up success and innovation:** Some countries have adopted innovative ways to ensure more children resume their learning. Inside Syria, learning opportunities have helped children deal with the worst kinds of trauma. Children who have been able to listen, play and talk in hundreds of safe spaces set up across the country are better able to process their experiences and are more optimistic about their prospects. These friendly learning spaces are essential to reach the poorest and most vulnerable of Syria's children. Meanwhile, a home-based self-learning programme is being developed.

Non-formal learning centres in Lebanon have helped thousands of child labourers attend class after work. They are also helping those who have dropped out of school to get back into class.

In Turkey, schools are being built inside the camps and in host communities where Syrian children are taught in Arabic, by Syrian volunteer teachers.

In Jordan's Zaatari camp, assembly points are organized where girls can meet a teacher and walk to school as a group to address parents' concerns for their safety.

**4. End the devastation of Syria's education infrastructure:** The collapse of Syria's education system can only be halted by political commitment from parties to the conflict. The devastation inflicted on Syria's schools must end; schools must not be used for military purposes, and should be declared 'zones of peace'; parties to the conflict have a responsibility to enable safe access for school children– and those who violate international humanitarian law should be held accountable. Donors should also provide funds to enable monitoring and reporting of attacks on education.



*A Syrian refugee girl holds up a pack of educational supplies on her first day of class in a UNICEF-supported school in the city of Sanliurfa, Turkey.*

## (Endnotes)

1. State of the World's Children Report 2011: UNICEF.
2. World Bank data; spending on public education as a % of GDP 2004-2008 & 2009 onwards; <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS?page=1>.
3. UNICEF calculates enrollment outside Syria on a country-by-country basis, based on the number of refugees registered with UNHCR and the number reported attending school by national Education Ministries. Regional enrollment rate of 38 per cent estimated here is the sum of the registered school-aged cohort in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt compared to the sum of reported school attendees.
4. Safe No More - Students and Schools Under Attack in Syria: Human Rights Watch (June 2013).
5. Lower attendance estimates are calculated based on official government figures of total refugee populations (registered and unregistered) compared to current national data on refugee school enrollments.
6. Lebanon enrolment data for Syrian refugees high estimate provided by Lebanon Ministry of Education October 2013.
7. School-age population data from UNESCO, recorded by UNICEF at [www.childinfo.org](http://www.childinfo.org). The primary and secondary school-age cohort in Lebanon is 924,000 and in Jordan 1,565,000 (2006 data).





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