

# CHILDHOOD UNDER FIRE

The impact of two years  
of conflict in Syria

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Save the Children

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Save the Children works in more than 120 countries.  
We save children's lives. We fight for their rights.  
We help them fulfil their potential.

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The children's drawings in this report were gathered as part of the Bahcesehir study.

**All names of children and parents who shared their stories have been changed to protect identities.**

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Cover photo: Hanane, four, at a refugee camp near the Syrian border (Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children)

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*“My message to the world? The war should stop in Syria so we could be able to go back to our country.”*

Nidal,\* 6

From the very beginning of the crisis in Syria, children have been its forgotten victims – facing death, trauma and suffering, and deprived of basic humanitarian aid. Save the Children estimates that nearly 2 million children are in need of assistance in Syria.

Through Save the Children’s work in Syria and the region, we are witnessing what is happening to children and the misery and fear they are living with every day. The only way to stop their suffering is to bring an end to the war. A larger humanitarian action response is absolutely essential, but we also recognise that, without peace, for children in Syria there will only be more death, and more destruction.

*“We had to stay in one room, all of us... I watched my father leave, and watched as my father was shot outside our home... I started to cry, I was so sad. We were living a normal life, we had enough food... Now, we depend on others. Everything changed for me that day.”*

Yasmine, 12

This report shows how the conflict is affecting all aspects of children’s lives. Families are struggling to find a safe place to stay, as nearly 3 million buildings have been damaged or destroyed. The lines of fighting move almost daily, so families often do not know if the place they’ve settled in today will be safe tomorrow. Most displaced families share overcrowded apartments and houses, but an estimated 80,000 internally displaced people are sleeping out in caves, parks or barns.

With more than 5,000 people being killed each month, the killing is touching everyone: a new study by a research team at Bahcesehir University in Turkey found that three in every four Syrian

children interviewed had lost a loved one because of the fighting. Children are being killed and maimed too, including by the indiscriminate use of shells, mortars and rockets. In one area of Damascus that was formerly home to almost 2 million people, heavy weapons were used in 247 separate recorded incidents in January 2013 alone.

Children are increasingly being put directly in harm’s way as they are being recruited by armed groups and forces. There have even been reports that children as young as eight have been used as human shields.

Conflict is threatening children’s lives in Syria from their first days of life. Mothers and their newborns are at greater risk of complications during childbirth. Many hospitals and health workers are being deliberately attacked, so people are reluctant to take the risk of going to hospital; across the country, a third of hospitals have been put out of action. This means more births are taking place at home, without a skilled birth attendant. There is also a worrying trend of attacks, mostly by Syrian government forces, on hospitals in contested areas. We have seen how even hospitals that have managed to stay open are finding it difficult to provide a high standard of care, with little or no heating, exhausted doctors, and intermittent electricity supply.

Children’s access to healthcare is massively reduced while the risks to their health grow. In many areas, water and sewage systems have been destroyed or made inaccessible by violence or displacement; in one area where Save the Children works, almost every family told us they did not have safe access to clean toilets. These unsanitary conditions are contributing to the growing number of cases of children suffering diarrhoea – the biggest killer of children globally.

Schools should be a safe haven for children. But 2,000 schools in Syria have been damaged during the conflict, and many are closed because they have become temporary shelters for displaced people.

\* All names of children and their family members who shared their stories have been changed to protect identities.

Experience in other conflict settings where Save the Children works shows that the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to ever go back, threatening their own futures and the future of the country.

*“I liked going to school... We used to write and play. When I want to remember something happy, it is playing with my friends on the swings. We laughed. I miss them.”*

*“At the beginning... there wasn’t shelling at my school, but after some time the shelling started. I stopped going to school when the shelling started. It wasn’t safe. I feel sad that my school was burned because my school reminds me of my friends. I love going to school.”*

Noura, 10

Mills, factories and roads are also being damaged and farmland threatened by shelling. As a result, most parts of the country are experiencing shortages of flour, forcing food prices beyond the reach of the poorest families. Combined with an alarming drop in the proportion of mothers breastfeeding their infants, this is leading to the first signs of increasing levels of child malnutrition in Syria.

It is not just Syrian citizens whose lives are being affected by the war. Non-nationals who were living as refugees in Syria (including large numbers of Iraqis and Palestinians) have limited access to assistance and are becoming ever more vulnerable.

Despite the efforts of the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), millions of people in desperate need in Syria are not receiving enough humanitarian assistance. Some areas have had very little aid or none at all. Insecurity is one of the biggest constraints: 15 aid workers in Syria have lost their lives in the past two years. Access is another huge obstacle, as control of access routes shifts continually with the fighting. This means that agencies sometimes have to negotiate more than 20 checkpoints for one journey, with each negotiation

taking time; and it only takes one checkpoint to refuse passage for the entire aid delivery to be halted.

There are also few organisations – local or international – with the skills and systems in place in Syria to respond to the massive scale of needs. Some Syrian agencies delivering assistance have strong political affiliations with one side of the conflict, representing a challenge to the principles of humanity and impartiality, which are essential to reach those most in need.

Save the Children is calling on the international community to take urgent action to address some of these challenges so that children and their families can receive the assistance they so desperately need. First and foremost, **the UN Security Council must unite behind a plan that will bring about an end to the violence and ensure that humanitarian aid reaches children throughout Syria.**

In addition:

- The international community must press urgently and explicitly for parties to the conflict to end the recruitment and use of children in military activities, and cooperate with the UN to ensure that all violations of children’s rights are documented so that those responsible can be held to account.
- International donors should quickly turn pledges into funding and deliver assistance on the ground in a way that is needs-based, sustained, flexible, and coordinated.

*“I wasn’t thinking; I just wanted to protect my children. I didn’t want anything else. I wasn’t even thinking; I just wanted to keep my children safe. If I die it is fine... but not my children. I want to keep them safe...”*

*“Syria is our country and we want to go back there. We don’t know who is right and who is wrong, but I know we civilians are paying the price.”*

Hiba

# SAFA

*“I want to tell the world about the situation in Syria... There is no fuel, no electricity, no food. This is the situation. There is shelling, explosions, gunfire... violence, death. No one is working, there are no jobs. People are just surviving day to day, living for the sake of living.*

*“Every human being should act – they should stop this violence. It is killing women and children. People are fleeing. We cannot bear this... This, this is too much...*

*“I hope that you can tell the entire world what I have said here, what I have seen. I am only one person, but every person will say the same. We are tired... tired of this. It has been two*

*years... killing, fleeing. I wish the world could see the truth. I wish you could.*

*“I don’t think there is a single child untouched by this war. Everyone has seen death, everyone has lost someone. I know no one who has not suffered as we have. It is on such a scale.*

*“When the world finally sees what is happening in Syria, when you go to villages beyond those you are ‘allowed’ into – you will not have the words. Everything is destroyed. A people is destroyed.*

*“You... will not be able to bear what you will see in Syria. We know what is happening, but the world is not listening.”*



PHOTO: JONATHAN HYANSSAVE THE CHILDREN

A refugee settlement near the Syrian border

# INTRODUCTION

*“Once, armed men chased us. They shot at [the three of] us and it hit the ground near my foot so I jumped. It hit below my foot and it touched my shoe but I kept running. We reached a wall and couldn’t run any more.*

*“I was scared, very scared. I was scared and my friends too. We were surrounded by walls. So we chose to jump over one wall. When we ran through the garden, we saw men with guns. They asked us why we were running. We told them we were being followed. They came with us and ran with us and we reached another wall, and one of them carried me over and my other friend jumped by himself. Another friend they caught, I don’t know what happened to him.*

*“My message to the world? The war should stop in Syria so we could be able to go back to our country.”*

Nidal, 6

From the very beginning, children have been the forgotten victims of Syria’s horrendous war. Today, nearly 2 million children are in need of assistance.<sup>1</sup> Six months into the conflict, 1,000 people were dying each month; now, it is 5,000 people each month.<sup>2</sup> The fighting is on such a scale that few children have been spared feeling its effects. Three in every four Syrian refugee children interviewed as part of new research by Bahcesehir University, Turkey, had experienced the death of a loved one due to the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

This report bears testimony to the suffering of Syria’s children. Deprived of food, water, healthcare; denied safety; their homes and communities destroyed; in a war being fought ferociously throughout the country, children above all are paying the price.

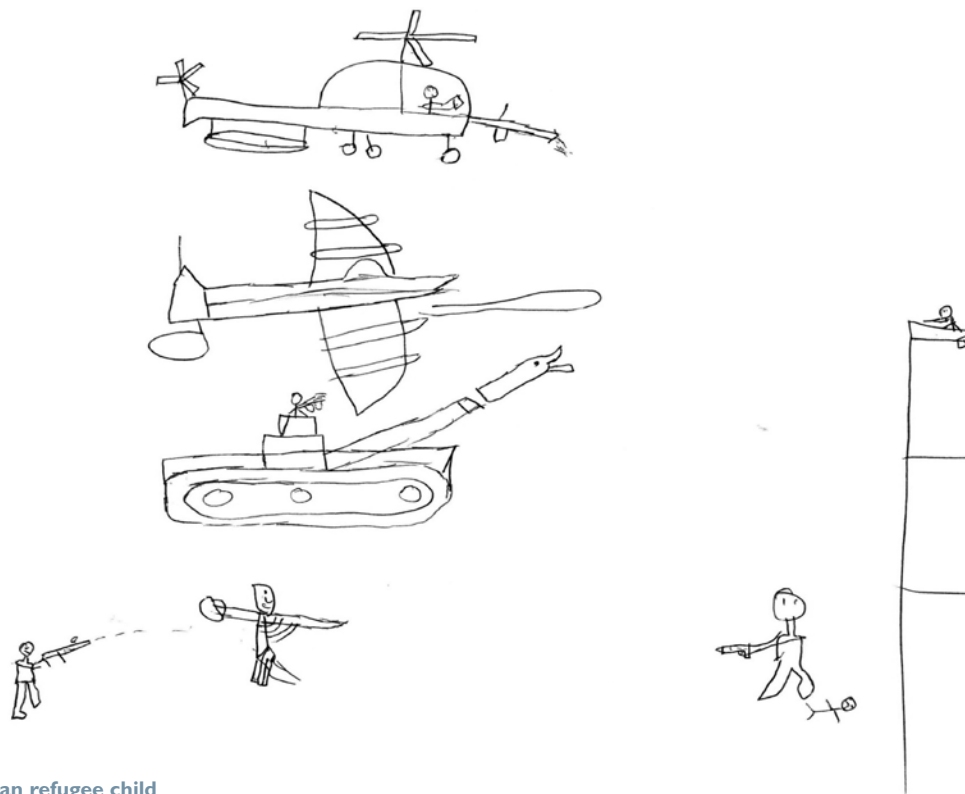
The chaotic reality of the conflict makes it difficult to gather comprehensive, definitive data. The information on which this report is based has been gathered through Save the Children’s response to the crisis on the ground, as well as the experience of other

Sana, three. Her older sister Yasmine explains what happened to their family on page 4.



PHOTO: JONATHAN HYANSSAVE THE CHILDREN





Drawing by a Syrian refugee child

agencies working in the country. The interviews carried out with children and their parents – all of whose names have been changed – provide powerful testimony to the devastating impact of the war on every aspect of children's lives today.

Through our work in Syria and the region, Save the Children is witnessing first-hand the misery being inflicted on children. They are telling us their stories and they want them to be heard. We are working tirelessly in Syria – and with refugees in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon – to meet the enormous humanitarian needs of children and their families.

An estimated 4 million people are in need of assistance within Syria, in addition to more than 1 million who have fled to neighbouring countries.<sup>4</sup> The United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are doing what they can to reach people in need by whatever channels available to them, and millions of people have already received food or other forms of assistance. Despite these efforts, children are not receiving the help they need.<sup>5</sup> This report is an urgent call to action: the international community must take stronger action to support humanitarian efforts, based solely on the needs and rights of those affected by the conflict,

and independent of any political interests. The scale of the crisis demands a concerted, coordinated, and large-scale response.

Stopping the war is the fastest way to stop the suffering and start the process of reconciliation and rebuilding. Humanitarian action is absolutely essential, but we also recognise that without peace, for children in Syria there will only be more death, more destruction; the legacy of this conflict grows more painful and costly with every day of fighting. The only way to stop the suffering is to bring an end to the war.

The first part of this report sets out how Syrian children's lives are being affected by the conflict, from the places they have to live to the violence they have to fear; the impact on their education and on their health. Children and parents describe in their own words how the war has affected their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The report then gives an overview of the challenges involved in delivering a humanitarian response of the scale and quality needed. Finally, we present Save the Children's recommendations for how to overcome these challenges to ensure that children's needs for basic survival and protection are met.\*

\* The report includes information from different parts of Syria, but where that information could compromise the security of children, their families and communities, or the agencies involved in the humanitarian response, we do not cite a location.

# THE IMPACT OF WAR ON CHILDREN

As Safa's story shows (see page vi), the civil war raging throughout Syria is devastating all aspects of children's lives. This section describes some of the ways the fighting is affecting children, beginning with the desperate shelter conditions for the millions of people inside Syria who have had to flee their homes. It then looks at the impact of the war on children's health, protection, education, and food security.

## SHELTERING FROM THE STORM

The fighting has damaged or destroyed an estimated 2.9 million buildings.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the destruction, 3 million people (one in seven Syrians) – people like Hiba and her family – have had to flee their homes.<sup>7</sup> A third of them have sought refuge in neighbouring countries (see box on page 5), but 2 million people remain displaced within Syria.

In some areas, the entire population of a town has fled. In others, people who had held on for months amid heavy fighting finally had to flee as they could no longer meet their basic needs. As Abu, a father in Damascus, told Save the Children: *“Why did we leave? We left because of the explosions, the constant shelling. Everything was a struggle, nothing was available – no food, no water.”* For many people, ongoing fighting makes it too risky to move to the border. For others, especially the poorest families, fleeing the country is not an option as they simply cannot afford the transport to get to the border.<sup>8</sup>

The options open to families displaced within Syria are bleak. The lines of fighting move almost daily, so people often do not know if the place they have settled in today will be safe tomorrow. Most people seek refuge with friends or relatives in whatever space they can spare – apartments, outhouses, even chicken sheds. The result is often extreme overcrowding, with

up to 50 children living in one house.<sup>13</sup> Thousands of people either have no extended family to turn to or cannot reach them. It is estimated that 80,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) are sleeping out in caves, parks or barns.<sup>14</sup>

Displaced people are receiving some temporary shelters and basic items provided by Syrian or international humanitarian agencies, but implementation challenges (described below) mean the level of assistance is far below international standards. Save the Children is seeing how this particularly affects girls: the shelters that thousands of families are living in are cramped, affording little personal privacy; girls are often afraid to go outside, especially at night, as the presence of armed men contributes to a pervasive fear of sexual violence.<sup>15</sup>

Families seeking refuge inside Syria have had to endure two winters that saw snow fall across much of the country, with temperatures as low as -8°C.<sup>16</sup> Families fled, often without enough time to gather winter clothing for children.<sup>17</sup> This winter, rationing of the power supply severely limited electric heating. Shortages of fuel pushed the price of kerosene up by as much as 500%, making it impossible for the poorest families to heat their shelters; in one area, 80% of households could not afford heating.<sup>18</sup> This makes warm shelters and blankets all the more important, but in 2012 only 30% of those who needed blankets or mattresses received them.<sup>19</sup>

This lack of safe and protective shelter is putting children's health at risk. In the depths of this winter, children aged 5 to 14 suffered the largest proportion of flu-like illness – 38% of all registered cases in Syria.<sup>20</sup> In some cases, children's lives have been put directly at risk: some shelters have accidentally caught fire, killing several children, because people made open fires as the only way of keeping warm.<sup>21</sup>

The next section shows in more detail the many ways in which the health of Syria's children is under constant assault.

## YASMINE, 12

*“Most of the houses were being hit. We had to stay in one room, all of us. The other rooms were being hit... The shelling was constant, I was very scared.*

*“I felt so afraid. I knew we could not move from that one room. There were 13 of us... crammed into one room. We did not leave that room for two weeks. It was always so loud.*

*“My father left the room. I watched my father leave, and watched as my father was shot outside our home... I started to cry, I was so sad. We were living a normal life, we had enough food. Now, we depend on others. Everything changed for me that day.”*

## THE REGIONAL REFUGEE CRISIS

This report focuses on the situation for children inside Syria, but the humanitarian crisis has spilled over the country's borders as more and more people flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring countries. As of March 2013, there were more than 1 million people – 52% of them children – registered as refugees or awaiting registration, with nearly 5,000 more every day.<sup>9</sup> The real number of refugees is likely to be much higher, as around 40–50% of refugees outside the established camps have not registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR – often in order to protect their identities.<sup>10</sup>

Jordan and Lebanon are home to the largest number of refugees, each with more than a quarter of a million Syrian people registered or awaiting registration. More than 180,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Turkey and more than 100,000 in Iraq, nearly 10% of whom are in Anbar province, where agencies like Save the Children have to manage the insecurity to try to meet refugees' basic needs.<sup>11</sup>

The refugee crisis is most visible at Za'atari camp in Jordan, where the government and humanitarian agencies are working hard to expand the provision of essential services like shelter and water. However, across the region, 70% of refugees are not in camps but are instead living in informal settlements or with extended family and friends, many of whom are themselves very vulnerable.<sup>12</sup>

Save the Children is working with UNHCR and other UN agencies, and the host governments in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, to ensure that all vulnerable groups get the assistance and protection they need. We are providing support to refugees (whether registered or unregistered) and host communities, as well as non-Syrians fleeing the country, such as Palestinians and Iraqis. As of March 2013, we had provided much-needed assistance to more than 240,000 people across the region, including shelter, food, and protection for children.



A refugee settlement near the Syrian border

PHOTO: JONATHAN HYAMS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

# HIBA

Hiba fled Syria with her daughter and severely disabled son.

*“Hospitals in Syria are being targeted with shelling. The one I took my son to for physiotherapy sessions is not operating any more. I couldn’t put him in a car and take him to a doctor, and then to which hospital? The roads were too difficult.*

*“I don’t know why some hospitals were shut down. Some were hit in the shelling, others were untouched; yet the roads were too dangerous for us to travel anyway. Any time I want to take him out, it’s dangerous for us. We stay at home, we call the doctor, but we can never reach him.*

*“How do I feel? Any mother’s heart would break seeing her son in this state... I am helpless. When I see him tired, I wish it’s me instead. He gets stiff and faints; his eyes stare in vain, and this is very hard for me... Sometimes I cry, but I can’t do anything.”*

*“Everyone is affected by this war. My daughter is 13 years old and goes crazy every time she hears a noise. Once the bombs started we ran... I couldn’t take my son’s*

*wheelchair, so I had to carry him, and run. We thought it is better for us to die in the street than under the rubble of our house. We ran at 3 in the morning and we didn’t know where to go. We were just running because we didn’t want to die under the rubble.*

*“I wasn’t thinking; I just wanted to protect my children. I didn’t want anything else. I just wanted to keep my children safe. If I die it is fine... but not my children. I want to keep them safe.*

*“In the morning we came back to our home, but it was ruined. There’s no place for us to go to, no safe space to go to at all. I think there is no safe space in Syria. It is beyond imagining.*

*“I cried and shouted but there was nothing else I could do. What can we say? Nothing. There is no human being living that wouldn’t be sad. We worked all our life to build our home and suddenly we lose it all.*

*“Syria is our country and we want to go back there. We don’t know who is right and who is wrong, but I know we civilians are paying the price.”*

PHOTO: JONATHAN HYAMS/SAVE THE CHILDREN



Hiba with her granddaughter

## STAYING ALIVE, STAYING HEALTHY

The civil war is being waged in every city in Syria, affecting everyone's health and their ability to get healthcare when they need it. Most of those injured by gunshots are young men, over the age of 18. But across the country, from being unable to find or afford medication to being injured by explosive weapons, children are feeling the effects. As Ara's story shows, some children's health is at risk from the moment they are born.

Stories like Ara's are far from unique. Save the Children has found that getting access to safe birthing facilities can be a dangerous, sometimes impossible struggle for mothers and midwives. The lack of neo-natal care and specialist medics, as well as the damage to health facilities, mean that many births are now taking place in people's homes, temporary

homes or shelters, without a skilled birth attendant who can assist with any complications. Given the difficult living conditions and the huge challenge of adequate sanitation for displaced people and their host families (described below), mothers and their newborns are at greater risk.<sup>22</sup>

Young children's health is also at greater risk now because the civil war has disrupted or completely stopped routine vaccinations, including for measles and polio. While UNICEF managed to conduct a vaccination campaign that reached 1.4 million children, often in very difficult circumstances, getting vaccinations into Rural Damascus governorate and also into opposition-controlled areas of northern Syria has proved immensely challenging. By January 2013, no more than a third of children had been vaccinated in the north of Syria; with every passing day, the potential for an epidemic increases.<sup>23</sup>

### ARA

Ara has three children.

*"I was very sick during my pregnancy but there were no doctors, no hospitals. It wasn't like my other pregnancies – I had no scans, no check-ups.*

*"It was morning when the contractions started. They carried on all day, I remember that I was so tired. I've always delivered in hospital before, never at home. After nightfall, I told my family that I must go to hospital, but they knew there was no way we could get through safely, shells were already falling. "Men shoot at everything they see at night, and there are so many checkpoints – we would never get past. Even if we did get through, where would we go? There are no hospitals now, only a makeshift clinic far away.*

*"Around 4am, I started to deliver, I was terrified. I was in so much pain, I thought I would die. There was a terrible complication in my birth – and I thank God some of my neighbours helped a brave midwife to get through to me. The cord was wrapped around my baby's neck – the midwife saved my baby boy's life, and mine too I think.*

*"My daughter was there for the birth, and she was terrified about the whole situation. She couldn't deal with what happened all around her – especially the shelling, and the screaming.*

*"It's because of these shells, the endless explosions, that I left my home. I left a few months after this birth, coming from my home only three days ago. For the journey, I carried my baby. I have other children and I wished I could carry all of them, but I couldn't – so they had to run for themselves. People were dying all around us, houses became rubble.*

*"If you ever went into Syria you will see something you've never seen before. It is not something you can believe...*

*"The children that are still in Syria... they are dying. It feels as though no one is helping, nothing is changing. Why can't you help them?"*

## ATTACKS TARGETING HEALTH FACILITIES AND HEALTH WORKERS

These growing threats to children's health in Syria are all the more alarming given the increasing devastation to health facilities and attacks on health workers, as Hiba's experience (see case study) vividly shows.<sup>24</sup>

This destruction is all too often the result of a targeted attack on health facilities: agencies working in Syria report that they are seeing a continued trend of attacks, mostly by Syrian government forces, on hospitals in contested areas. This appalling trend is in contravention of international humanitarian law, and means people are afraid to go to hospitals even when they are in urgent need of treatment.<sup>25</sup> In Deir ez Zor governorate, for example, every single hospital has been damaged, while in Aleppo governorate, two-thirds of hospitals are no longer functioning. Across the country, more than half of Syria's hospitals have been damaged, and nearly a third have been put completely out of action.<sup>26</sup>

Even hospitals that are still functioning are not able to deal with the growing numbers of people who

need treatment. In one area, Save the Children found hospitals with little or no heating, exhausted doctors, intermittent electricity supply, and woeful conditions for paediatric patients – despite the best efforts of courageous and committed staff who were continuing to work in such difficult conditions.<sup>27</sup>

The fighting in cities and reports of targeted attacks on doctors mean that many medical staff fear for their lives when they travel to work. Understandably, many decide they simply cannot take the risk: 50% of doctors are reported to have fled Homs, and according to one account, the number of medics practising in and around Aleppo has fallen from 5,000 to just 36.<sup>28</sup>

## TRAPPED IN WAR AND POVERTY

The fighting has made it much more difficult for people to get to hospitals and other health facilities for treatment, and it has also led to a major shortage of medicines in many areas, as Save the Children has witnessed. Before the conflict began, almost all drugs used in Syria were produced in-country.<sup>29</sup>



PHOTO: JONATHAN HYAN/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Souha, three, at a refugee settlement near the Syrian border

Now, shortage of fuel and hard currency, disruption to supply chains and damage to factories have all massively slowed production of medical supplies. Wealthier Syrians are reportedly travelling to neighbouring countries for healthcare; but, as with heating and food, the medicines that are available are priced beyond the reach of the poorest families.<sup>30</sup>

The poorest families' health is also at greater risk, because they are more likely to be living in overcrowded communal shelters with little or no access to clean water and adequate sanitation. More and more children are suffering from diarrhoea, hepatitis A, upper respiratory tract infections, and skin rashes because of the deterioration in sanitation conditions.<sup>31</sup> In one rural area where Save the Children is responding to the crisis, almost every displaced family said they lacked safe access to clean toilets. In many cases, parents feared for the safety of their daughters with the presence of so many men carrying weapons.<sup>32</sup>

Even in cities, children now have to go to the toilet in public spaces because damage to the water and sewage system means that toilet flushes no longer work. In addition, the proportion of sewage being treated in Syria has halved since the conflict began. This presents a huge risk of disease outbreak, especially as clean water becomes more and more scarce. In some areas, water supply is now down to a third of pre-crisis levels; in some parts of Aleppo, for instance, water is only pumped for four hours a day.<sup>33</sup>

### AN UNSAFE REFUGE

Before the conflict began, thousands of people fleeing conflict from elsewhere in the region had sought refuge in Syria. These people are particularly vulnerable now (see box). For example, before the conflict, an estimated 10,000 Palestinian refugees were living in Der'a camp in south-west Syria. Water and sanitation provision was poor even then; now, the facilities have closed altogether.<sup>34</sup>

## PALESTINIAN AND IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA

Not all those affected by the conflict are Syrians. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, Iraqis, Afghans and others are in Syria having sought refuge from violence and insecurity back home. There are believed to be more than 500,000 Palestinian refugees and 480,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria.<sup>35</sup> Approximately 40% of these are children – though children under five are often not registered, so this is probably an underestimate.<sup>36</sup>

Refugees in Syria were particularly vulnerable even before the conflict. For example, children born to Palestinian refugee families were less likely to be enrolled in school than Syrian children, and more likely to die before their fifth birthday.<sup>37</sup> Also, a high proportion of Iraqi refugees – two in every five – had special protection or medical needs that required targeted support.<sup>38</sup>

The outbreak of conflict in the country these refugees originally came to for protection means they are now much more vulnerable and face new risks. For instance, Yarmouk camp, a Palestinian refugee settlement in Damascus, has become a

battleground; there is fighting almost every day in or around the camp. Three-quarters of the 150,000 residents have once again had to flee, and because some borders to neighbouring countries are closed to Palestinians, they remain trapped inside Syria.<sup>39</sup> The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) provides essential assistance to Palestinian refugees, but insecurity has forced it to halt its operations in many camps in Syria. As a result, only 40% of its clinics are still open, and more than 80% of school-age Palestinian refugee children are unable to attend school.<sup>40</sup>

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have already fled Syria, and UNHCR estimates that a third of those still in Syria will leave during 2013.<sup>41</sup> Most of them will probably go back to Iraq, despite the continuing insecurity there and the lack of jobs and basic social services.<sup>42</sup>

Refugees in Syria already faced difficult and uncertain futures. Now, finding themselves engulfed in conflict once again, their options are even more limited, their situation even more desperate.



## DANGER ON ALL SIDES

The conflict in Syria has had terrible repercussions for children's lives and health. When the conflict is visited directly on children, the consequences are truly harrowing. These threats to children are what the next section describes.

When we ask parents how their children are coping with their experiences, the most common reply is that it has left children with a pervading and persistent feeling of fear. When children are given the opportunity to draw pictures of their recent experiences, they fill the pages with violent and angry images of bloodshed, explosions, and the trappings of war. Parents also say that their children are showing signs of significant emotional distress, such as nightmares, bed wetting, or becoming uncharacteristically aggressive or withdrawn; any loud noise reminds the children of the violence they fled from.<sup>43</sup>

A new study by a research team from Bahcesehir University in Turkey, found some chilling evidence of what children are experiencing. Two-thirds of those interviewed had been in a terrifying situation where they felt they were in great danger; one child in three had been hit, kicked, or shot at. And three in every four children interviewed – children like nine-year-old Ibrahim – had experienced the death of at least one loved one.<sup>44</sup>

As documented in the UN Secretary-General's 2012 report on children and armed conflict, some abuses in Syria are so heinous that they represent grave violations of children's rights under UN Security Council Resolution 1612.<sup>45</sup> Children are being killed and maimed every day in Syria. The conflict has claimed the lives of some 70,000 people and an estimated 300,000 are believed to have been injured.<sup>46</sup>

## NOOR, 8

*"We were all scared. Because of the shelling, we were hiding in the bathroom and the kitchen. The shelling happened every day for a while... Every day, in the evening.*

*"This is what I remember of Syria. No, nothing good, no good memories. I remember how my uncle and my grandmother died, because I saw it... What do I remember of Syria? Blood. This is it."*

## IBRAHIM, 9

Ibrahim's mother and two older brothers died when their home came under attack.

*"When I heard shelling in Syria at night, it always woke me up. Sometimes I stood outside to see where the noise was coming from and sometimes it made me really afraid, so I just stayed inside. I used to tell my siblings they better stay inside because of the shelling.*

*"I miss the days my mum took me to the playground in Syria. My mum is dead, and my two older brothers too... They died from the shelling of our home. Nadeem was my brother and my best friend. I wish I can have fun with him and go to school with him again.*

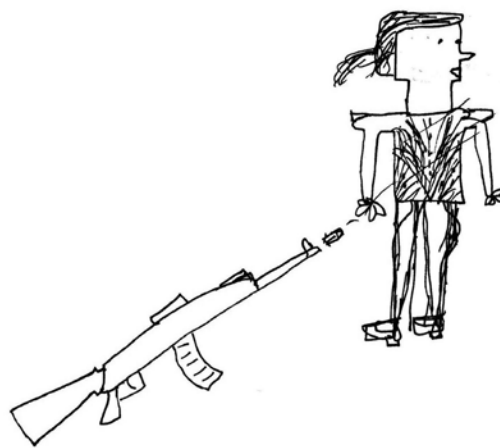
*"I just wish they were still alive. It makes me want to go back to Syria. When I return, I want to visit their graves and say 'I miss you'."*

While we do not know just how many of these casualties are children, hospital reports show that an increasing number of children are being admitted with burns, gunshot wounds, and injuries from explosions.<sup>47</sup> Every day, children remain at risk of death and injury, including permanent disability. Children are not being spared from the violence.

The use of explosive weapons in populated areas has killed and maimed children as well as adults. In January 2013 alone, there were more than 3,000 recorded 'security incidents' – clashes or attacks – in Syria; 80% of them involved heavy weapons such as mortars, shells and rockets. This fighting was concentrated in urban areas; in Damascus, 247 incidents were recorded in just two communities that were formerly home to 1.8 million people.<sup>48</sup>

The blast and fragmentation effects of explosive weapons cover a wide area, and do not discriminate between civilians and military targets. All parties to the conflict are using these kinds of weapons in built-up areas where many families remain trapped, with government forces in particular using air strikes and Scud missiles.<sup>49</sup> There are multiple reports from across Syria of blasts from explosive weapons killing several children at once – sometimes from the same family, sometimes infants less than three months old.<sup>50</sup>

Aside from their devastating immediate impact, explosive weapons also leave a potentially fatal legacy. As much as 11% of explosive ordinance does not explode on impact; these explosive remnants of war are now scattered across Syria, a country where people have had no previous experience of dealing with such hazards. Children face the risk of death or serious injury either from playing with unexploded shells or simply through being forced to live and move around in a landscape scattered with unexploded remnants. Even fighters have been killed from trying to deal with unexploded grenades.<sup>51</sup>



### THE THREAT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence is another grave violation of children's rights. There is some evidence that girls and boys as young as 12 are being subjected to sexual violence, including physical torture of their genitals, and rape.<sup>52</sup> The prevalence of such abuses is hard to establish, as survivors often do not report the attacks for fear of dishonouring their family or bringing about reprisals. But fear of sexual violence is repeatedly cited to Save the Children as one of the main reasons for families fleeing their homes.

There are also reports that early marriage of young girls is increasing. This can be understood as desperate families like Um Ali's struggling with ever-narrowing options to survive. They may be trying to reduce the number of mouths they have to feed or hoping that a husband will be able to provide greater security for their daughter from the threat of sexual violence. However, anecdotal reports from organisations working inside Syria indicate that early marriage is sometimes being used as a 'cover' for sexual exploitation, where girls are divorced after a short time and sent back to their families.<sup>53</sup> In such a chaotic and dangerous environment, children and young girls in particular are at much greater risk of abduction and trafficking, especially for purposes of sexual exploitation.



Drawings by Syrian refugee children

### DISPLACEMENT AND SEPARATION

Faced with appalling and indiscriminate violence, the only choice left to millions of people has been to flee their homes. These displaced people may find shelter, but they may not find security: once they have left their homes, families may be repeatedly displaced as the fighting spreads, each time carrying with them harrowing memories and fewer and fewer possessions. According to one survey of Syrians who fled to Mafraq governorate in Jordan, more than 60% had been displaced twice or more before crossing the border, each time settling for a week or more before being forced to flee again.<sup>54</sup> In some situations, people have no time to pick up even a coat or proper shoes; they literally have to run for their lives.

In the panic of escape, many children become separated from their families. In other cases, parents make the tough decision to send children away to relatives in areas deemed less insecure. This is why, in one area of Syria where Save the Children is responding to the crisis, a quarter of families are hosting other people's children. As the situation deteriorates further, many foster families will no longer be able to cope, increasing the risk that children may be handed over to institutions or abandoned to live on the street and fend for themselves in a country at war.<sup>55</sup>

### THE RECRUITMENT OF CHILDREN BY ARMED GROUPS OR FORCES

There is a growing pattern of armed groups on both sides of the conflict recruiting children under 18 as porters, guards, informers or fighters. For many children and their families, this is seen as a source of pride. But some children are forcibly recruited into military activities, and in some cases children as young as eight have been used as human shields.<sup>56</sup>

The use of children in combat is a grave violation of their rights; it contravenes international law and commitments made by both parties to the conflict. It also puts the children involved at enormous risk of death, injury or torture. One monitoring group affiliated with the opposition, the Syria Violations Documenting Center, has documented the deaths of at least 17 children associated with armed groups since the start of the conflict. Many other children in armed groups have been severely injured; some have been permanently disabled.<sup>57</sup>

Thousands, if not millions of children in Syria have experienced appalling abuses during the war. In front of high-level representatives of the international community in Kuwait in June 2012, the UN's Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Valerie Amos, highlighted the urgent need for psychosocial support for infants and children – like Hamma's youngest daughter – to deal with what they are going through.

## HAMMA

*“My other daughter, Sham, is one year and seven months. Do you know what her first word was? ‘Enfjar’ [Explosion]. Her first word! That’s why we left, that’s why we ran. My daughter’s first word is explosion. It is a tragedy. We felt constantly as if we were about to die.”*

## EDUCATION UNDER ATTACK

It is difficult to know the full extent of the disruption to children's education caused by the war in Syria, given the relative scarcity of data. But the illustrative data that do exist, and the information Save the Children has been able to gather, are deeply worrying.

It is clear that education is part of the front line of the war on children. Schools are protected by international human rights law; they should be safe places for children to play, learn and develop. But in Syria, schools have come under direct attack, denying children their right to education in a safe learning environment. An eight-year-old boy from Aleppo refused to talk for more than two weeks after fleeing Syria. When he eventually did speak, his first words were, “They burned my school.”<sup>58</sup>

Children like Noura, fleeing from the fighting, just want to be back at school, back to normality, learning and playing with their friends.

*“I liked going to school in Syria. We used to write and play. When I want to remember something happy, it is playing with my friends on the swings. We laughed. I miss them.”*

*“At the beginning... there wasn't shelling at my school, but after some time the shelling started. I stopped going to school when the shelling started. It wasn't safe. I feel sad that my school was burned because my school reminds me of my friends. I love going to school.”*

*“I would hear the shelling... I would get scared and try to hide. One day I was with my friends playing in the sun and sand. We were collecting the sand, and putting it in a bucket, then we flipped it. We made a castle like that, always. Then a sound from the mosque shouted ‘RUN, RUN’. We ran away to our houses, and sat inside because we knew the shelling started. We ran very fast. I was afraid that shrapnel would hit me.”*

*“We were terrified, and cried a lot when this happened. The mosque speaker sounds the alarm on the incoming shelling, so we can seek shelter and hide. Sometimes we heard the mosque alarms and sometimes we didn't.”*

*“I came home, we hid in the living room and we prayed. I prayed that my brother and sisters will stay safe. I also prayed for my school not to be destroyed.”*

Noura, 10

In Syria, before the conflict, access to basic education was free and more than 90% of primary school-aged children were enrolled – one of the highest rates in the Middle East.<sup>59</sup> But the conflict is undoing all those achievements, denying children the right to education, depriving them of a safe learning environment, and threatening their futures as well as that of the country. In other conflict settings where Save the Children works, once children have been forced to drop out of school, their aspirations and faith in the education system (especially state schools) are severely dashed. The longer children are out of school, the less likely they are ever to return. Millions of children and young people in Syria may never regain the chance to fulfil their true potential.

Some schools have closed because displaced families are living in them, as they had nowhere else to stay. An estimated 1 million people are living in schools and public buildings not designed to be lived in, and so lacking proper heating and sanitation.<sup>60</sup> In one area of Syria where Save the Children is responding, during

# UM ALI

Um Ali has three children.

*“There has been no school for two years. Because of this, my son missed his baccalaureate, and my daughter missed her 11th grade. It’s too dangerous to go to school – they are being shelled, and even if they are still there, you get shot at if you try to get there.*

*“My daughter, she is 16 and she loved school. She was the first in her class, and she wanted to become an architect. But this war... we were too worried for her. We could not protect her, so we had to marry her. I know that men are hurting women, old women, single women – everyone. We needed her to have a protector.*

*“We couldn’t let her go outside at all. And if someone comes inside your house, you cannot defend yourself as just a woman. If they come in, what will her father do? Sit aside and watch? They were attacking women. Her father told her this is the only solution. There are no schools. One year, two years, no schools. What about marriage? ‘Your cousin is a good man, take him, he is good.’ So she said ‘As you wish’. But she did not want to get married, she wanted to study. But there were no more schools. So... she was married. This is happening a lot within Syria, many women I know are marrying their daughters – even younger than 16 – to protect them.*

*“What do people need most? People in Syria need everything. They need help, they need to be saved. People are dying. People are dying and there is slaughter and the rest of the world is just watching. There is no help from outside. They keep holding meetings and that’s it. They are just... watching. We are calling for them, but no one is listening.”*



the bitter winter months, school benches were stolen for firewood; desperate, understandable measures to stay warm, but further erosion of children's opportunities to learn and play.

Thousands more schools have been put out of use by the fighting. Attacks on schools represent grave violations of children's rights because of their direct and lasting impact on children. Yet according to the Syrian government, 2,000 schools have been damaged in the conflict; one UN survey found that a quarter of schools in one area had been damaged or destroyed.<sup>61</sup> This not only makes children's place of learning unsafe or unusable; it can also make children afraid of returning to school even when the fighting is over. There have also been reports of parents not allowing their children – especially girls, like 13-year-old Saba – to go to school for fear of being attacked, caught in crossfire, or directly shot at.<sup>62</sup> As a result, attendance rates, particularly for displaced children, vary widely. According to one estimate, more than 200,000 children displaced by the fighting in Syria are missing out on education.<sup>63</sup>

In one area, Save the Children has witnessed incredible dedication on the part of teachers who have no materials to work with, but teach what they can remember by heart. Despite threats against them, displacement, and the destruction of schools, do not lessen their conviction that children need to continue their education. These dedicated efforts are enough to keep education going for 200 children.<sup>64</sup> But they are not able to provide the standard of basic education that the children have a right to, and there are hundreds of thousands more who are getting no formal education at all.

The next section describes how the war is depriving children and their families of enough food to survive on.

## GOING HUNGRY

*“What we struggled for the most in Syria was to get food. Even the water tanks were shot at to leave houses without water. We almost starved to death.*

*“During the conflict, bread supplies were completely cut off from my town. I saw it with my own eyes – a truck carrying flour into the town to supply the bakeries, and the truck was forced to turn back, and this is how our bread supply was cut.*

*“They cut our water, they cut our electricity, our food and our bread. We managed to make it through, by uniting. If one of the neighbours was able to get bread, they shared it with the rest... This is reality.”*

Faris, father of six

Before the conflict began, although Syria was considered a middle-income country, it had relatively high levels of stunting – a result of chronic malnutrition.<sup>65</sup> Acute malnutrition was rare, and remains so.<sup>66</sup> However, as the fighting continues and families are finding that accessing nutritious food becomes ever more difficult, expensive, and even dangerous, there are the first signs of an increase in the number of children suffering malnutrition.<sup>67</sup>

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2.5 million Syrians are in need of emergency food assistance.<sup>68</sup> However, one recent assessment in the north of the country estimated that 3.2 million people need food assistance in 58 sub-districts alone, suggesting that the situation may be much worse than previously thought.<sup>69</sup>

The fighting has drastically curtailed food production in the country. Jamal, like 20% of farmers, reports that it was too unsafe to harvest any of his crops. Insecurity has also hampered cross-border trade

### SABA, 13

*“We left Syria because there were lots of explosions but we didn't want to leave our house. We were injured and we got scared, that's why we left. What do I remember? People being hurt. People dying... In front of my eyes.*

*“They were hitting schools. Many children would die, so we got scared and stopped going to school. No children would go to school, it was too dangerous. It makes me sad that I'm not going to school.*

*“Before the crisis we used to play outside. We weren't scared. Now? We stay inside and be afraid. That is it.*

*“We should stop the shelling. For me, explosions lead to destruction. And more than that – the shelling makes people get injured, and it makes people die. The only effect is destruction, death and wounded people. My home has been destroyed. We were in it when it was hit, and when it fell. I feel as though all of Syria has been destroyed.”*

of food and other essentials like cooking oil; and in some cases, road closures and fighting have disrupted deliveries of food relief (this is discussed further in the next section).<sup>70</sup> Shortages of flour – a key staple – have been reported in most parts of the country due to damage to mills, closure of factories, lack of fuel for delivery, road closures, and insecurity.<sup>71</sup>

*“We stopped leaving our houses because of the danger, which meant no work and no more income. It was impossible to go to the field and check on my crops. Before the conflict, we harvested our olives and grapes, but for the past year, I swear to you not one farmer harvested a single olive. Not one human being. Whoever decided to visit his crops, knows he is going to die.”*

Jamal, father of eight

The scarcity of food has contributed to soaring food prices, exacerbated by the closure of many food markets due to insecurity. This has ended up centralising supply in private bakeries and leaving price-setting in fewer hands.<sup>72</sup> In Aleppo, which has seen heavy fighting, the price of bread is now up to ten times what it was when the conflict began two years ago.<sup>73</sup>

For many people, the price rises mean they are unable to feed their families. Even for those who have enough money to buy food, the risk of being caught up in the fighting makes joining the long queues at bakeries too dangerous to attempt. As we see through Save the Children’s response to the crisis, few displaced families have any food stocks at all. They are having

to cut down on the number of meals they and their children eat each day.<sup>74</sup> “We were living from the food we had stored away – jam, a little bread,” Hamma told us. She was heavily pregnant when she fled Syria with her one-year-old daughter. “Prices are so high – food is ten times as much as it was. All I want for my baby is a safe life. That is my only hope.”

Access to affordable food is a daily challenge for families in Syria, but malnutrition in infants and very young children can be staved off if they get the right food and micronutrients, for which breastfeeding is essential. Traditionally in Syria, the majority of mothers do not breastfeed their infants, but Save the Children has seen indications of a further reduction – between 15% and 50% – in the proportion of mothers breastfeeding.<sup>75</sup> This is because of a widespread perception that the stress women are under reduces their ability to produce enough breast milk. Another factor is that there has been uncontrolled distribution of breast milk substitutes such as infant formula.<sup>76</sup> Given the poor sanitation conditions many families are living under, described earlier in the report, we have seen how this is contributing to more infants and children suffering diarrhoea.<sup>77</sup>

This is just one small indication of the complexity of the situation facing children and their families in Syria. The next section outlines some of the main challenges that Save the Children and other agencies face in trying to help children in Syria in the context of the conflict raging around them.

# HUMANITY'S BEST EFFORTS?

The enormous humanitarian needs in Syria and the widespread violations of children's rights demand action. Humanitarian agencies, including Syrian and international NGOs and UN agencies, have already mobilised to help all those people they can reach.

But the challenges involved in the humanitarian response in Syria are immense. Some of the biggest issues concern ongoing insecurity, limited access, constraints on implementation capacity, challenges to coordination, and insufficient funding, which are all described in more detail below.

While it is impossible to say with any certainty, there are believed to be millions of people in Syria who need assistance and who are not receiving enough, if any at all.<sup>78</sup> There have been recent breakthroughs in humanitarian access, with some UN agencies succeeding in negotiating access across conflict lines to deliver essentials such as food and blankets.<sup>79</sup> While these are much-needed positive signs, the overall picture remains bleak. It is likely that millions of children are not getting the help and protection they need.

**Insecurity:** The most evident constraint to reaching the millions who need assistance is insecurity. Crossfire, indiscriminate use of force, explosive weapons, landmines, unexploded remnants of war, kidnapping; the list of threats to aid workers goes on, and the threats are real – 15 aid workers in Syria have lost their lives in the past two years, trying to get assistance to civilians caught up in the conflict.<sup>80</sup> Some of them were directly targeted despite wearing internationally recognised humanitarian emblems.<sup>81</sup> Ambulances have been directly attacked too: four out of five Syrian ambulances have been damaged during the conflict.<sup>82</sup>

Whether indiscriminate or targeted, attacks on aid workers and aid convoys make some areas too risky to operate in. For instance, the UN agency responsible for providing assistance for half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria (UNRWA) had to close

most of its operations in Yarmouk, where 150,000 Palestinians had been living.<sup>83</sup> Crossfire, shelling and aerial bombardment mean agencies are taking significant risks to reach those in need.

**Assent of parties to the conflict:** The conflict in Syria has created a complex patchwork, with different armed groups and forces active in different areas. There are some large areas where control is relatively unified, and where large numbers of people can gain assistance, if security allows. In other areas, the situation is much more fragmented and dynamic, so aid agencies must negotiate with numerous factions to move around and reach people affected by the crisis. Sometimes more than 20 checkpoints must be negotiated for one journey, with each negotiation taking time; it only takes one checkpoint to refuse passage to mean that the agency has to halt an aid delivery, with no one gaining assistance.

For Save the Children, humanitarian impartiality is our only passport to respond in Syria, meaning we have already been able to provide assistance to thousands of children. Denying children their right to receive humanitarian assistance by denying agencies access to them is a grave violation of children's rights and contravenes international humanitarian law. Experience tells us that negotiations to secure access based on humanitarian principles will continue to be difficult, and necessary.

**Capacity to deliver:** Prior to the conflict there were very few organisations – local or international – with sufficient technical and operational capacity for a humanitarian response in Syria. As the conflict has escalated, the UN and NGOs have been trying to increase the scale of their operations, within the constraints of access and insecurity. To complement direct operations, many agencies, including Save the Children, work with Syrian partners who are able to deliver a humanitarian response on a large scale. However, there are not enough experienced local organisations working in accordance with humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality to match the enormous needs.

# NAZIHA, 17

*“One evening I was at my house with my husband and I was holding my daughter in my arms, breastfeeding. We heard a noise outside. Something hit the house and I don’t remember anything after that... All I know is that after, I became disabled – I can’t move my arm or my leg. Now I can’t stand or sit without help.*

*“There were many people who were injured or who became disabled in Syria like this. This cannot go on. Someone should put an end to it. People are losing their children, brothers, parents. Some people are getting shot. Others are unable to leave the country. Children in Syria are dying, or becoming disabled like I was. Until when will this keep going?”*





For most agencies – international and Syrian – getting hold of the commodities needed to deliver life-saving assistance can be extremely challenging. Whether it is medicines, food, blankets and tents, or people with the necessary expertise and visas, there are significant obstacles to increasing the scale of operations in Syria to meet the immense and urgent needs.

**Humanitarian principles and coordination:**

Due to the difficulties of access and insecurity, there is no central focus in the country for ensuring that humanitarian community has a clear, impartial, national picture of the needs and the response. For example, many of the humanitarian organisations operating in Syria are not present in Damascus. Conversely, of those organisations operating from Damascus, many are not present in places like Aleppo, in the north.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has been proactively working with non-governmental partners to find creative solutions to this dilemma. It is not simply an issue of avoiding duplication and filling the gaps, important though this is. It is also about ensuring that the response is based on humanitarian need, rather than political considerations.

Some Syrian diaspora groups with strong political affiliations have given substantial financial and technical support to groups on whichever is ‘their side’ of the conflict. In addition, the Syrian conflict has deeply divided the international community, with some individuals, groups or governments funding only one side or the other, regardless of what is best for children and their families in need. The humanitarian imperative is that the priority for the flow of essential aid to Syria must be to reach those who need it most. Acting on that imperative gives agencies best chance of security in what is a complex and fast-moving conflict.

Operating in this context requires constant vigilance and negotiation. Given the access challenges described earlier, all sides to the conflict want to have a role in the targeting of aid into the country. However, it is vital that agencies delivering humanitarian assistance remain impartial.

**Funding:** In 2012, funding for the international humanitarian appeal for Syria fell \$130 million short of the requirements identified by the UN – a shortfall of more than a third.<sup>84</sup> As the humanitarian needs escalated throughout the year, this not only meant that agencies in Syria could not provide much of the necessary assistance; it also meant that they were still trying to increase the scale of their operations.

By the end of January 2013, the appeal received a huge boost: international donors pledged \$1.5 billion to support the aid effort, including substantial amounts from the European Commission, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>85</sup>

These promises of funding are very welcome, but they need to be urgently translated into real funds for agencies on the ground. At the time of writing this report, UN figures showed only 2.9% of the required funding for the emergency education response had been provided, only 2.6% for community services (which includes programmes to improve child protection), and a shortfall of \$72 million for health – 88% of the requested funds.<sup>86</sup>

While sufficient funding is vital for an effective humanitarian response in Syria, the challenges set out here make one thing clear: funding alone is not sufficient. The next section sets out what Save the Children believes needs to happen to help address the humanitarian suffering.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

As the conflict continues, so does the impact of the war on children. Above all else, **Save the Children calls on the UN Security Council to overcome its divisions and urgently unite behind a plan that will bring about an end to the violence in Syria.**

Ending the pain that this report sets out will not be easy, but it is possible. Just as the waging of this war is a result of human actions and decisions, so can be its end. The appalling suffering of Yasmine and Ibrahim and Naziha and the thousands like them demands an end to the conflict now.

Tragically, but realistically, peace will take some time to realise, and many more lives will be lost or destroyed in the meantime. **The international community must press urgently and explicitly for parties to the conflict to take specific measures to improve and secure humanitarian access and to ensure the protection of children.** Other recommendations addressed to specific actors are detailed below.

## PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT

Save the Children takes no side in this conflict. All those who are fighting in Syria have a responsibility under national and international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians and specifically children, who are entitled to special protection. **All parties to the conflict should commit publicly, and take immediate measures, to:**

- allow unfettered, safe access by humanitarian agencies trying to provide assistance to those in need, including access across the lines of the conflict
- ease any bureaucratic constraints on agencies increasing their capacity to respond, allowing humanitarian agencies, their staff and supplies to reach those in need. This should apply to all sectors of humanitarian activity, including

protection, and clearance of unexploded remnants of war

- ensure that children and all civilians and civilian objects are not targeted by armed action. This should include targeting, occupation, or military use of medical facilities and personnel, schools, sites for internally displaced people, and humanitarian agencies and workers. Civilians should be allowed safe passage out of areas of active military engagement
- end the use of explosive weapons in populated areas
- cease the recruitment and use of children under the age of 18 in armed groups and forces, release all children currently associated with armed groups and forces, and cooperate with the return of these children to their families, as well as necessary systems for recovery and reintegration
- cooperate with the UN to ensure that all violations of children's rights are documented so that those responsible can be held to account.

## THE UNITED NATIONS

The UN has classified the Syria response as a level 3 – the highest category possible. This is a clear recognition of the scale and urgency of humanitarian need in Syria. This categorisation requires the appointment of a 'Super' Humanitarian Coordinator, activation of Clusters for coordination, and the agreement of a strategic approach. The UN should take action on the following areas:

**The UN Secretary-General, the UN-LAS (League of Arab States) Joint Special Representative for Syria, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and OCHA**

should expressly urge parties to the conflict to end violations of children's rights and to take the specific steps outlined above with utmost urgency to ensure that children are protected from the conflict.

**OCHA** should:

- work towards a sustained staff presence, where security allows, in its coordination hubs outside of Damascus to work with government and non-government actors to improve humanitarian access
  - use its presence in the region to complement the work of the Damascus Humanitarian Country Team to develop a ‘whole of Syria’ picture of the humanitarian needs and response. This is a means to identifying gaps in coverage and pressing for humanitarian access through all channels to reach those people
  - press for activation of all Clusters, including education and protection
  - prioritise, at the highest levels, strengthening coordination with donors and all aid actors from the Gulf and the Middle East. This should also promote decision-making based on impartial needs assessments, as well as avoiding duplication, and maximising coverage by all actors in the response
  - undertake contingency planning for humanitarian needs in Syria with all relevant partners, ensuring that this informs planning for the refugee response, emergency preparedness, and post-conflict planning.
- **quickly disbursed:** recent pledges should be turned into committed funding as soon as possible and disbursed to agencies delivering assistance on the ground
  - **sustained:** humanitarian needs will continue to increase as long as the conflict lasts, and people will need assistance long after the conflict is over
  - **flexible,** including supporting humanitarian preparedness to respond if the situation changes and access improves
  - **coordinated:** donors should ensure that their humanitarian funding is coordinated with other donors’ funding
- advocate for increased humanitarian access by any possible channel, and for greater humanitarian presence on the ground
  - fund integrated approaches across all sectors for an effective holistic response, including:
    - **protection:** children need psychosocial support; mapping and clearing explosive remnants of war is essential; and protection from all abuses, including grave violations of children’s rights, must be supported
    - **education:** this is to protect children now, but also to protect their development and that of Syria once the conflict is over
  - continue to support the humanitarian response reaching refugees in neighbouring countries and work with regional governments to ensure that borders are kept open for refugees.

## INTERNATIONAL DONORS, INCLUDING THOSE FROM THE GULF REGION

The pledges made at the Kuwait donor conference in January 2013 for the Syria response and the refugee crisis will allow a significant increase in life-saving assistance. The crisis will be prolonged, however: the need for emergency relief and help with recovery will continue long beyond any cessation of hostilities. With this and the wider context in mind, all donors should:

- commit to supporting agencies that are delivering assistance on the ground, with support that is:
  - **needs-based:** in line with the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship, prioritisation should not be linked to any political agenda but rather according to greatest need, including for Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians, or any other group.<sup>87</sup> To facilitate this, donors should strengthen implementing partners’ capacity to undertake needs assessments inside Syria

## ACTORS DELIVERING HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

There is a range of actors delivering humanitarian assistance in Syria, from established international NGOs to relatively new community groups that may have strong affiliations with one side to the conflict. We urge all these groups to:

- commit to sharing information regularly with other humanitarian partners, including OCHA, to ensure that a full picture of needs and responses can be developed, notwithstanding the need to manage risks to the security of programme staff and beneficiaries

- commit to upholding the Red Cross/Red Crescent and NGO Code of Conduct, ensuring that assistance is not linked to any political agenda but is delivered according to where there is greatest need<sup>88</sup>
- conduct joint needs assessments, coordinating with other agencies to ensure that the methodology is compatible with that used in other areas of the country. All assessments should include child protection elements
- work with communities to have IDP camps, schools, and hospitals declared as 'zones of peace', agreed with armed groups and forces (learning from experience in other countries such as Nepal, for instance).

## NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

As of March 2013, more than 1 million Syrians had fled to neighbouring countries, along with thousands of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees who had been living in Syria. Those governments who have maintained open borders and are generously facilitating the response to refugees' needs are performing an essential humanitarian service. Neighbouring countries should:

- keep borders open for humanitarian purposes, including allowing entry for all those fleeing Syria to find safe refuge
- continue to work with humanitarian agencies to ensure a reliable humanitarian supply chain for refugee response and for operations in Syria.

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# CHILDHOOD UNDER FIRE

The impact of two years of conflict in Syria

*“My message to the world? The war should stop in Syria so we could be able to go back to our country.”*

Nidal, 6 (name changed to protect identity)

From the very beginning of the crisis in Syria, children have been its forgotten victims – facing death, trauma and suffering, and deprived of basic humanitarian aid.

*Childhood under Fire* shows how the conflict is affecting all aspects of children’s lives.

It goes on to look at the challenges in the humanitarian response, and puts forward recommendations to all parties to the conflict, the United Nations, donor governments, agencies delivering humanitarian assistance, and governments of neighbouring countries.

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