

Syrian children growing up with sights, sounds of war

February 13, 2014

BEIRUT, Lebanon—A small girl, her face smeared with dirt, approached the crowd holding a pack of lighters for sale. Barely reaching the height of an adult's waist, she glanced upward at passersby, asking in Arabic if they would purchase one of her multicolored lighters. When asked h



Syrian girls sit in an afternoon class at a school in Jordan. Recognizing that many Syrian children have been without formal education for three years, many Jordanian schools have opened their doors to Syrian students. (IMB Photo)ow old she was, she responded shyly she is 4.

Pedestrians walking the streets of Beirut, Lebanon, cannot miss the children weaving through the cars and crowds. They walk up to strangers holding items to sell—lighters, roses, gum packets and a variety of nonessential items.

Lebanon houses more than 826,669 registered Syrian refugees—52 percent of them children. Many of the children are not in school, and they must

resort to street work or manual labor to help provide for themselves or their families.

Conflict that began in March 2011 continues to threaten the childhood and the futures of many Syrian children.

Children have lost family members, and explosions have destroyed their schools. Some children have experienced physical wounds themselves.



A Syrian refugee boy sits in his home with his toy gun. Half of Syria's two million refugees are children, three-fourths of them under the age of eleven. Many are undocumented and easily fall prey to exploitation. They display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and experience elevated levels of depression. (Photo: IMB / Jedediah Smith) More than 5 million Syrian children are affected by the ongoing conflict, and analysts estimate more than half the 2.2 million Syrian refugees are children, the United Nations reports.

Schools in Syria have turned into fighting grounds or homes for internally displaced people, as the conflict rages on in many communities and cities. UNICEF reported one school in five in Syria has been destroyed. UNICEF, [Save the Children](#), U.N. refugee agency and other nongovernmental organizations are fighting to provide aid and educational assistance to the

growing number of children who are displaced and refugees.

“Millions of children inside Syria and across the region are witnessing their past and their futures disappear amidst the rubble and destruction of this prolonged conflict,” said Anthony Lack, UNICEF’s executive director. “We must rescue them from the brink, for their sake and for the sake of Syria in future generations.”

As many families have been internally displaced, children are forced to begin to work to help provide for their families, are recruited for the militia or are advised to stay indoors to escape harm. Some children have been out of school three years and are forgetting what they have studied.

A Christian worker with a ministry in Syria that provides education and trauma therapy to children explained many children have lost their fathers and brothers to the war.



An increasing number of children have taken to the streets of Lebanon to sell or beg for money. (IMB Photo) While teachers provide the children the opportunity to learn English, Arabic and math, they also believe it is important to teach the children not to have hatred or suspicion of one another and learn to love each other.

“Children feel like they are rejected. They are feeling (this) because they are children of rebels or terrorists and feel conflicted,” she said. “People tell them they are the reason for why everything is happening. But I say: ‘You are children. God loves you. You are not the reason for what has happened. You are the hope of Syria.’”

Another teacher in Syria requested prayer for the children’s psychological conditions.

“Children in these three years are raised in a real hard situation,” she said. “They know all the types of weapons, and they know all of the parties that are fighting, and kids at this age must know something else. All their games are guns and tanks and they are really in the trauma of war. They know nothing except war and blood and fighting.”

Children are used as propaganda in the war. Images of the children holding guns are posted online, along with video clips that show preteen boys involved in combat. One eerie video depicts a boy soldier wailing after a friend is killed. With a pat on his back from an adult soldier, he continues walking amid the devastation.

International law sets 18 as the minimum age for participation in direct hostilities, but Human Rights Watch has interviewed many children between the ages of 14 and 18 involved in the conflict.

While boys face the threat of forced conscription in the fighting, girls in Syria are at high risk of sexual violence, according to Save the Children.

Desperate not to subject their daughters to potential horrors, many families make the difficult decision to marry their daughters to suitors in Syria and abroad.



Many young girls inside Syria are at a high risk for being subjected to sexual violence, according to Save the Children. Desperate to avoid subjecting their daughters to potential horrors, many families are making the difficult decision to marry their daughters off to suitors internally and abroad. (IMB Photo)“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,” Save the Children wrote in [a recent report](#) called “Childhood Under Fire.”

While the risks in Syria for children are great, more than 1 million child refugees living outside of Syria face a different type of potential harm.

An increasing number of children have taken to the streets of Lebanon to sell or beg for money. The Beqaa Valley in Lebanon is home to many Syrian families, and UNICEF cautiously is observing as the children go out each morning to the fields to perform adult labor.

“We are following up with NGOs to ensure the work is not exploitative or hazardous,” said Maria Calvis, a UNICEF worker. “We have also started a campaign to ensure parents are aware this is not the best thing for kids.”



Tired from his day of work selling coffee, a young Syrian refugee, rests on a bench. (IMB Photo) In Lebanon the United Nations is launching a “Back to Learning” campaign, which “provides for informal education so children don’t fall too far behind.” They hold classes for the Syrian children who reside in the Beqaa.

Another country greatly affected by the war, Jordan, is working alongside nongovernmental organizations to provide schooling for Syrian refugees. More than half a million Syrian women and children were registered with the U.N. refugee agency at the end of September. Children from 5 to 17 make up 25 percent of the Syrian refugee population in Jordan, according to the *New York Times*.

The Jordanian Ministry of Education has allowed school programs for Syrians, permitting extra spots in schools to be filled by the children and also providing after-school programs. Around 80 Jordanian schools have introduced extra daily schooling for the students.



Fawzi (not his real name), a teenage Syrian refugee in Lebanon, tries to make ends meet by shining shoes in the city. Left without a home, Fawzi resorts to sleeping under a bridge at night. (Photo: IMB / Joseph Rose) Organizations throughout the region are fighting not to let this generation of children be forgotten. One Christian Syrian said: “We have so many kids that are growing up with the sounds of war. These kids—they shouldn’t have to listen to that. They should have a place that is peaceful and secure and not have to worry about the war. That is a big (prayer) request.”

As Syrian Christians work tirelessly to help the children around them who are struggling, organizations and ministries are working outside of Syria.

“We want to show them that we are always available for them,” one Christian worker said. “We are standing with them.”