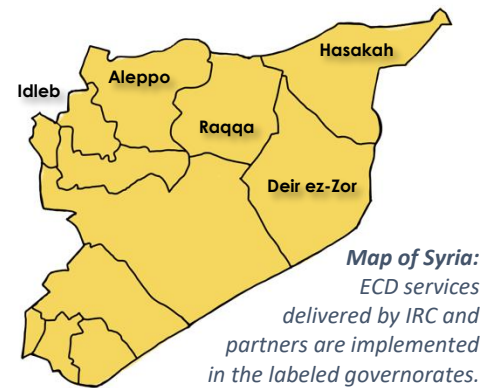


# Early Childhood Development

## IRC Syria – Ahlan Simsim



For millions of children across the Middle East, some of the most formative years of their lives have been marked by displacement, chaos, and violence. Roughly 52 million children across the region are in need of humanitarian assistance;<sup>1</sup> 6.5 million live within Syria's borders<sup>2</sup>. Conflict and displacement can negatively impact children's intellectual and social-emotional development and threaten long-term economic prosperity, health and well-being. These children are at high risk of failing to reach their full developmental potential. As the country enters its 12<sup>th</sup> year in crisis, more than 13 million people<sup>3</sup> remain displaced both inside and outside of Syria. Prioritization of early childhood development (ECD) support is vital and continued advocacy is needed to garner both financial and institutional support for sustained impact at the national level.



### AHLAN SIMSIM

In 2018, the MacArthur Foundation committed \$100 million to Sesame Workshop and the IRC to support children impacted by conflict and crisis in the MENA region. This early childhood intervention includes high quality program models that support children's social-emotional and intellectual development and programming for caregivers that supports them to aid in their child's development beyond the classroom. Ahlan Simsim program services are delivered in IRC and NGO partner centers as well as in partnership with local authorities to reach children at scale and address some of the most critical developmental challenges we see today.

### CONTEXT

Conflict, coupled with economic downturn and general deteriorating living conditions have driven the magnitude and urgency of need in Syria, alongside recent major climate changes that are felt most acutely by vulnerable populations. As of 2023, only one humanitarian access route remained for Syria, exacerbating an already desperate situation. The conflict and compounding effects of COVID-19 have dramatically impacted children's education: estimates range from 2.5 to 4.5 million for out-of-school children in Syria. For those attending school, only one third of schools are considered fully functional and therefore able to support children's education. In the last few years of the war, there has been a noted increase in strategic attacks

**14.6 million people across Syria** are in need of humanitarian assistance

**Women and children comprise 75%** of those in need

**76% of households** in Syria are unable to meet their basic needs

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/media/113966/file/2022-HAC-MENA.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/number-syrian-children-need-hits-record-high#:~:text=AMMAN%2C%208%20May%202022%20-%20,more%20than%2022%20years%20ago.>

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/96224>

targeting schools and education personnel. Out-of-school children are vulnerable to increased rates of child labor, child marriage, and armed recruitment in addition to many long-term consequences that affect a child's healthy development. According to UNICEF<sup>4</sup>, one in four children under age 5 is malnourished<sup>5</sup> and one-third of households<sup>6</sup> report that their children experience psychological distress, key indicators that demonstrate the dire need for services. The Ahlan Simsim team and partners are committed to providing crucial services for vulnerable children and their caregivers across northeast and northwest Syria and are working more diligently than ever to continue to implement, improve, and advocate on behalf of children.

## PROGRAMMING

IRC's ECD programs are designed and adapted to meet the distinct needs of children and families in Syria with social-emotional learning and learning through play at the core. These intentional, tailored program models support children's development, facilitate instructors' professional development, and bolster parental engagement and caregiver wellbeing.

Since the start of the Ahlan Simsim project through December 2022, ECD programs have **reached nearly 500,000 children and caregivers** in Syria.

Programs IRC has designed and delivers, both directly and with local partners, to support ECD in Syria include:

- **Ahlan Simsim Friends:** a modular and flexible program targeting children 3 to 8 years old, this program can be implemented for as little as six hours and can be included in a wide range of settings in partnership with any sector that programs for caregivers or children. The program offers over 30 activities focused on social-emotional learning and inclusion, among other crucial subjects and includes worksheets, storybooks, and videos. The program is designed inclusively to welcome all children, including those with disabilities.
- **Ahlan Simsim Families:** a modular and flexible program targeting caregivers of children 0 to 8 years. The program gathers caregivers together to discuss topics related to child development, play, and parenting with tools and activities for follow-up.
- **Group Reach Up and Learn:** originally a home-visiting program that has been adapted for implementation in centers and mobile service units in Syria, this program engages caregivers and children ages 6 months to 3.5 years in playful activities. It includes a library of resources using recycled, low-cost materials and contextualized storybooks.
- **ECD Awareness Sessions:** caregiver-facing sessions focused on a variety of subjects including the importance of ECD, positive discipline, learning at home, and healthy child brain development. These programs are delivered by trained ECD staff and Community Health Volunteers.
- **Health Integration:** the program supports healthcare providers working with caregivers and their young children in health clinics. Critical ECD tips and information have been integrated into doctor, nurse, and midwife training to reach clients where they are. This covers knowledge and activities supporting healthy child growth and development as well as parenting skills.

"The sessions made me realize that the **most important period in a human's life is the early childhood stage.**"  
-Ahmad, father of Karim, age 4 in Areesha camp in Northeast Syria

In response to contextual needs, a significant portion of the project's portfolio in both northeast and northwest Syria has aimed at supporting children with disabilities and their caregivers through equipping them with inclusive services while educating the wider community about disabilities. According to UNHCR, an estimated 36% of those displaced across Syria have a disability<sup>7</sup>. To ensure our services are comprehensive for all populations, IRC and partners' have worked to create inclusive and accepting environments. Our inclusive content and services adopt a human-centered approach in both caregiver- and child-facing activities. Inclusion within Ahlan Simsim services extends beyond disability inclusion. For

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.unicef.org/syria/media/10496/file/02\\_WOS%20Health%20and%20nutrition%20May%202022.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/syria/media/10496/file/02_WOS%20Health%20and%20nutrition%20May%202022.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/mena/syria-crisis>

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR (7 Apr 2021). *Humanitarian Needs Assessment (HNAP) Syria* "IDP Report Series 2020: Disability Prevalence and Impact." Retrieved from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85891>

example, consistent coordination with local leaders and influencing community members through implementation has also encouraged stronger male caregiver engagement.

These inclusive and needs-responsive service delivery programs are coupled with the all new and locally produced, Arabic-language version of *Sesame Street*, also titled *Ahlan Simsim*, designed specifically for displaced populations in the MENA region by IRC's Ahlan Simsim partner Sesame Workshop. The combination of targeted direct services and mass media helps meet critical needs on the ground for an immersive child and caregiver-centered experience. Ahlan Simsim also curates content on Instagram and Facebook for easy, online access to information and activities that work in conjunction with the show and direct and partner-implemented services.

## SCALING & SUSTAINABILITY

Underpinning the approach of Ahlan Simsim is partnership with local actors to influence the systems that govern and deliver ECD in order to scale up access to quality ECD services and impact to ensure sustainability long-term. However, scaling with government structures in Syria is dependent upon what specific systems are in place according to region. As a result, Ahlan Simsim teams and partners have prioritized collaboration and coordination with locally acting organizations and governing bodies to achieve scale and ensure sustainability of quality ECD as a priority using a context-specific and tailored approach. In northeast Syria, to reach the most vulnerable children, the IRC is working with local authorities. Partnerships with the entities of Women, Municipalities, and Education have been developed that integrate Ahlan Simsim programming into their existing services in daycares and schools. In northwest Syria, IRC Ahlan Simsim has worked in partnership with 18 local organizations to fill the need for a governance body to support, fund, and ensure priority of ECD in the region by establishing an Early Childhood Development Network, comprised of technical clusters including Education and Child Protection for a holistic approach to ECD. Working closely with the Education Directorate has also resulted in an official ECD strategy that includes Ahlan Simsim training for teachers and content for students in school and mobile centers that service schools. Coordination with local authorities in the northeast and with the ECD network in the northwest represent exciting opportunities for growth and development, and provide key insights that will inform what can be created in other contexts.

## RESEARCH & LEARNING

To understand the impact and quality of implementation of programming run in Syria, we continually monitor program implementation for both direct services and partner-implemented services. We utilize this information to inform how we can evolve and adjust our programming for our beneficiaries. Monitoring tools utilized include surveys for children, caregivers, and educators to understand program quality from all perspectives

## WHAT'S NEXT

As current Ahlan Simsim funding comes to a close at the end of 2023, IRC and partner Sesame Workshop are looking toward sustainability, as well as understanding the persistent and emerging needs in the MENA region. In Syria, we understand that the depth of the negative impacts that prolonged conflict has and will continue to have on caregivers and their children. As a result, the need, relevance, and demand for ECD services in Syria continues and is only increasing. The coming years will be focused on leveraging the current investments in programming and strategic partnerships and progress made thus far, backed by monitoring and learning, while continuing support local actors in our shared mission of helping children across Syria develop and thrive in a holistic and healthy way.

**93.5% of caregivers** in the program demonstrated developmentally supportive interactions with their children as a result

An **average of nearly 13% improvement** in scores on child development indicators was shown for children whose caregivers joined Ahlan Simsim caregiver programs

For more information on the Ahlan Simsim initiative, contact Heidi Rosbe, [heidi.rosbe@rescue.org](mailto:heidi.rosbe@rescue.org)