

10 Years of War in Syria:

The Lasting Impact of a Childhood Without Peace



March 15 marks a grim anniversary in the ongoing war in **Syria**—it has now been a full decade of conflict. Ten years into the war, the country remains without a plan for peace, continuing the **devastation for Syrians**. At least 12.3 million people have been displaced by crisis either within Syria or as refugees in neighboring countries, **5 million of whom are children**. These children have spent their critical development years knowing nothing but war.

Ten years of prolonged trauma, displacement and fear present especially severe challenges for children. The Syrian crisis, for both children still in-country and those displaced to places such as **Jordan**, **Lebanon** and **Iraq**, has spawned an entire generation whose childhood is defined by adversity. The challenges they face at such a young age include loss of their home, family and friends, and opportunities to play and learn. A survey of caregivers in northwest Syria who had fled their homes during the escalation of violence between December 2019 and March 2020 suggest a deeply troubling situation:

- 62% of caregivers surveyed by the IRC reported that their children habitually began crying without a clear reason, or when fearing violence from everyday situations such as a plane flying overhead.
- 46% reported that their children were unusually sad, showing no interest in playing or having conversations.
- 47% said that their children experienced night terrors or trouble sleeping.

Cover Image: Anas, an IRC Reach Up & Learn volunteer and Syrian refugee, reads and plays with Rashid, 2 years old, at Rashid's parent's home, Hamzah (father) and Reem (mother). IRC is working with parents on methods of engaging, stimulating play. Anas currently works with 22 families, walking to all appointments no matter how far away they are. PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREW OBERSTADT / THE IRC

Below: PHOTO CREDIT: AHMAD AL-JARERY / THE IRC





Research shows that when children experience severe trauma in conflict settings, it can disrupt healthy brain development, which can have both short-term and long-term impacts on their futures.

Children sing and dance at the IRC Safe Learning and Healing Space.
PHOTO CREDIT: ABDULLAH HAMMAN / THE IRC

Compounding these challenges, children and their families living through the conflict have had to also grapple with the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Routine and predictability are essential for the development and mental health of children, particularly those growing up in fragile contexts. Whatever structure and routine Syrian refugee families had been able to assemble have been completely upended by the pandemic. With schools and other gathering places closed, these refugee families have often found themselves further isolated and overburdened, and children have borne the brunt: another recently completed IRC survey of refugee caregivers in Jordan showed the impact that school closures and lockdowns are already having in the home. Caregivers reported that:

- 58% of children were exhibiting anxiety or exhibiting behaviors associated with anxiety.
- Nearly 60% were fighting with siblings.
- Approximately 40% reported that children were fearful about their health.
- 21% said their children had started to isolate themselves.

But in the face of all these daunting and intractable challenges, we also know that children and their families are inherently resilient, and there are evidence-based approaches to help build this resilience. The impact of the crisis can be reduced or reversed as long as children and caregivers are supported, including with quality learning opportunities and resources to support their well-being.

The IRC and Sesame Workshop have been partnering to provide this urgent support through **Ahlan Simsim**, an early childhood development program that delivers early learning and nurturing care to children and caregivers affected by the Syrian conflict. The program aims to overcome the complex challenges of growing up in a childhood that has only known war by helping children heal, learn, grow, play and thrive.

Adapting to the added challenges of the pandemic, **Ahlan Simsim pivoted in a number of ways to meet children's needs even in remote settings**. Engaging materials and content previously used in learning centers are now being delivered at home. This includes phone-based outreach, and digital delivery of messages and materials via WhatsApp. Through these channels, caregivers are provided with key messages on mitigating the spread of COVID-19 and how to educate their children on best health practices. They receive play-based learning activities that are age-specific and easy to do at home.

While innovative programs like Ahlan Simsim are bringing about lasting change, governments and donors must commit to funding and taking up quality solutions so that another generation of children is not left behind. Even as governments and education ministries in the region are launching distance or e-learning platforms, these responses often neglect the needs of children affected by crisis, especially the youngest children.

PHOTO CREDIT: AHMAD
AL-JARERY / THE IRC





To prevent another ten years of childhood lost to war in Syria, the international community can:

PHOTO CREDIT: AHMAD
AL-JARERY / THE IRC

- Increase international funding for education and early-childhood programs in crisis contexts. This funding must be sustained over multiple years, recognizing that children's recovery, learning and healthy development take longer than short-term projects can allow.
- Host countries must commit to including refugee and crisis-affected children in their education and other social service plans.
- All stakeholders should support interventions for young refugees and crisis-affected children that include their health, nutrition, protection, care and early learning.

We need urgent action to ensure that no other child affected by conflict reaches their tenth birthday knowing nothing but war, and to provide all children who have lived through so much the support they need to recover, thrive and have a better future for themselves.