9 YEARS OF SCHOOLS ON THE FRONT LINE

THE IMPACT OF AIRSTRIKES ON SYRIA’S SCHOOLS
Stop Bombing Schools

A Message from Othman Moqbel, Chief Executive of Syria Relief

This conflict has now raged for 9 years. That’s longer than the Second World War and almost twice as long as the First. At the last estimate, this conflict has killed around 585,000. Around a fifth of those have been civilian casualties. Modern warfare has distorted from how wars used to be fought. As I write this, the humanitarian crisis in Idlib has become another example of a theme prevalent throughout this and most modern conflicts - civilians and civilian infrastructure are being treated as if they were legitimate military targets. The rocketing civilian death toll has made a dire humanitarian situation even worse. One of the biggest victims of this conflict have been children and the education system.

Of the 164 schools that Syria Relief operates in Syria, 6 have been directly targeted by airstrikes since the start of the Idlib campaign on April 30th. Dozens were killed, some were children. To mark the 9th anniversary of the Syrian conflict, we are publishing this report. We have detailed the impact of schools being targeted on the children, on Syria and the nation’s future.

In this report, we detail that we believe that the impact of the Syrian crisis on schools is contributing to an increased risk of illiteracy among Syrian school children, especially in areas like Idlib and Aleppo whose schools have been heavily impacted by the conflict. Syria once had a thriving education system, prior to the conflict and the spiralling violence its schools have faced.

Source: Save the Children

Photo: Syria Relief Website

Cover Photo: Getty Images

Photo: Syria Relief

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We are using this document to highlight the devastation that the constant attacks on education are having on Syrian children and the entire population of the country we are making the following calls:

· For all military actors in the conflict to stop deliberately bombing schools
· For all military actors in the conflict to go to greater efforts to avoid bombing schools
· For all actors claiming to be legitimate governments of Syria, or parts of Syria, to pass legislation which brings them in line with the 2015 Safe Schools Declaration and International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law
· The external governments who ally themselves with the actors in the conflict to pressure the belligerents into avoiding the targeting of schools
· For host countries of Syrian refugees to provide an education that will provide their Syrian refugee communities with an education which will allow these refugees to gain skilled jobs and enter the workforce on their eventual return to Syria

We are using this document to highlight the devastation that the constant attacks on education are having on Syrian children and the entire population of the country we are making the following calls:

· For more funding from both the international community and the general public for education projects within Syria, to combat the growing potential of a 'lost generation' within Syria

Now, more than ever, children and their schools are under threat in Syria. Save The Children reported in September than over half of the children in the currently besieged Idlib province will be unable to attend school due to the scale of the damage and destruction of schools.

Education facilities are no longer places where children can feel safe, they are places where they fear death. However, avoiding school also has tragic consequences for a child; if a child is out of education then their potential is under severe threat, too. Some parents in Syria are forced to choose between risking their child’s life by sending them to school or risking their future by not sending them.

Destroying a school is in no one’s interest and we need to ensure it stops happening. Now.

6 OF SYRIA RELIEF’S 164 SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN BOMMED

THE TARGETING OF SCHOOLS DURING THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Over 40% of Syria’s schools have been hit by violence since the start of the conflict in 2011, this is one of the highest percentage of schools damaged in any conflict ever recorded.³ The deliberate targeting of schools is becoming a common feature in modern warfare. There has been considerable damage or destruction to schools in the recent conflicts in Yemen, Bosnia and Iraq. However, no conflict has recorded the amount of schools subjected to violence close to the currently growing number in Syria, since the end of the Iraq War. For almost all of the Syrian conflict, over half of all the worldwide attacks on schools have happened in Syria.⁴

The initial attacks on schools in 2011 were looting and arson, however, the escalation of the conflict in 2012 led to dozens of direct attacks on schools⁵. These attacks further intensified during 2013, with the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack describing them as “indiscriminate and targeted,” the deadliest attack occurring in February 2013 where 50 people were killed after a car bomb exploded whilst students were leaving a school in Damascus. In 2014 there was further escalation, with the Ministry of Education reporting that 889 schools were either partially or fully damaged by the end of the year, and UNICEF counted over 160 children killed and 343 wounded.

2015 saw a similar level of schools being targeted, with Idlib, Aleppo and Rif Dimashq being the governorates most heavily affected. Since October 2016 strikes on schools have been almost daily, carrying this rate into 2017, 2018, 2019 and the present day in Idlib.⁶ Schools are now mainly targeted through air strikes and mortar rounds, however suicide and vehicle bombs have also directly targeted schools.⁷ UNHCR believe that there are 2.1 million children in Syria out of education⁸, that number rises to almost 3 million when you factor in Syrian refugee children in neighbouring countries deprived of an education.⁹ A further 1.3 million are at risk of dropping out and the targeting and destruction of schools due to the conflict is one of the main factors in this. In Syria’s Northwest, at least 100 schools have been damaged or destroyed recently, as attacks on educational facilities and personnel have increased.¹⁰ The pattern we are seeing is that areas undergoing heavy bombardment have seen more of their schools fall victims to military action. Following the siege of Aleppo, 73% of schools suffered damage and we are
currently seeing a high proportion of schools being attacked in Idlib. At Syria Relief, we have seen six of the 164 schools that we run in Syria hit by air strikes as part of the ongoing Idlib military offensive, killing dozens.

The targeting of schools is illegal. During armed conflict, it is required of all parties to obey International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law, under which the full range of a child’s rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled. Attacking schools breaches multiple articles of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions. Attacks on schools and hospitals are one of the Six Grave Violations listed in 2017 by the UN Security Council.

It is believed that schools are being targeted as part of a military strategy that seeks to undermine the other side’s legitimacy by targeting a visible institution of their authority. Other motives behind the deliberate offensive on schools, are to take revenge for actions by the enemy combatants, to show strength and ruthlessness to the population and, ultimately, to terrorise. The regularity of schools being struck and the alarming number of child deaths as a result, means that some parents are too scared to send their children to school. Whilst this does not implicate causation, the increased attacks on schools throughout the conflict, roughly correlates with increased foreign involvement within the conflict.

Outside of schools which have been destroyed by direct targeting, there are other schools who have fallen victim due to other aspects of the conflict, some have been shut down and used as shelter for IDPs fleeing the conflict, others are being used for detention, military bases and vantage points for snipers. In 2018, the UN Security council found 24 instances of when Syrian schools had been used as ammunition storage, military bases or detention facilities.

A CHILD’S STORY

Like most boys his age in the UK, Umar is football-mad. However, unlike most boys his age in the UK, he has had to flee his home because the school he went to was bombed into destruction.

My name is Umar Rehal, I am in Year 8. I came here because of the air strikes in Kafr Zait. Unfortunately, I have had to stop going to school because there was a barrel bomb dropped onto our school, destroying it completely. Teachers stopped turning up because they were afraid of being bombed. It was frightening, we would try and play football but we could hear bombing all the time in the distance.

We didn’t know when they will drop the bomb on us. After we fled our homes, I didn’t go to school at first, I would just play marbles or football in the street. I was encouraged to join this school run by Syria Relief and I am so glad I did, because I was taught how to read and write, I learned how to do mathematics and we play sport – I can now play football with my friends but I could also learn.
THE IMPACT ON SYRIA’S CHILDREN

Children are paying a disproportionately high price in this conflict, they are being killed, their education facilities are being targeted and they are being robbed of a future. 29,017 children have been reported to have been killed in the conflict.18

Due to the conflict and the continued occurrence of schools being on the front line, Syrian children do not have the level of literacy and numeracy expected of them or that will be required for them to achieve a meaningful education. Syria Relief’s education experts believe that literacy in Idlib is currently suffering due to the conflict and the frequency that schools are on the front line, however we have found that through effective and quality education, illiteracy can be quickly tackled. It is dependent on consistent and quality education. A report by the International Rescue Committee in 2017 found that 59% of Grade 6 (Primary Education Level) children in Syria could not read simple 7-10 sentence story, that would be expected of a Grade 2 (Primary Education Level) student.21 A further report by People In Need found that in the Idlib and Aleppo Governorates, two areas heavily affected by the conflict, that many children are struggling with basic literacy and numeracy. At Grade 3 level (Primary Education level) over 60% of children are not at the literacy level expected of Grade 2 students and at Grade 8 (pre-Secondary Education Level) 29% are still not at this level. 80% of Grade 2 students are not at Grade 2 numeracy levels and 38% are still not at this level by Grade 8.22

Children are not receiving the quality education that is their right as set out in the UN’s Convention On The Rights Of The Child. The schools that are open face overcrowding, a severe lack of facilities and resources (educational or otherwise) to meet the demand caused by so few other schools being operational.23 There is also a lack of qualified teachers to provide children with a decent education and the teachers available are largely unqualified to deal with the severe psychosocial issues that surround a generation of children growing up in a conflict zone.24

Other threats to children in Syria completing schooling are children being recruited for militaries in this conflict25 and child abductions (69 cases were reported in 2018).26 Girls face a heightened risk of dropping out of school due to the symptoms of the conflict, as parents deem education perilous or not of high enough quality to warrant sending their daughters. As a result, there is a rise in families adopting traditional gender attitudes which forces girls to concentrate on more domestic matters instead, with some falling victims to early marriage.

Boys face an increased threat of being recruited into the armed forces. In ISIL controlled areas, schools were shut down and some Arab parents in Kurdish controlled areas have reportedly stopped sending their children to school due to lessons being taught in Kurdish.27 There is also an issue around children allegedly or actually associated with designated terrorist groups, such as ISIL and its affiliates or children born of sexual violence being restricted from education and other rights.28

Syrian refugee children, usually boys, are often forced to drop out of what education they do receive to work instead, to help support their family. Syrian refugee girls face sexual and gender-based violence, as well as early marriage.29 Other refugee children who do enrol in education, are more likely to dropout as they face disadvantages due to receiving an education in an unfamiliar curriculum and language, in some cases.30 Some refugee children also face problems with bullying at schools in host countries.31

Only 61% of refugee children attended primary school in 2017 (compared to 92% globally) and 23% were in secondary school (84% globally). Approximately two-fifths of school-aged Syrian refugee children are out of school.32

Syrian children in refugee camps aren’t receiving a formal education. On a recent deployment to a refugee camp in Arsal, Lebanon, we found that children there would be required for a recognised qualification. If they were to return to Syria or join more formal education infrastructures outside of the refugee camps, children there would be two years behind.

Any parent will tell you that children need stability, and schooling is the main form of institutional consistency that children have in their lives. Schooling provides so much more than the education aspect; it helps provide children with more rounded human and social capital.
The Wider Impact of Attacks on Syrian Schools

Attacks on schools harm the children who attend them, the teachers and staff who work in them and Syria’s education system as a whole. Repairing the damage (physical, psychological and economic) done to the education system requires significant public funds - the greater the damage, the greater the cost - and worsens institutional fragility. Prior to the start of the conflict in 2011, 97% and 67% of Syrian children were receiving primary and secondary education respectively, with high literacy rates. However, the fighting has seen over 10 years of improvement in education, which had allowed Syria to surpass the regional average, regress completely.

Attacking schools increases the dropout rate and teacher attrition, which makes it hard for any education facilities, even the ones not damaged to provide a quality education or function at all. The areas that have seen the biggest decline in education quality and class attendance have been those hit by violence.

A generation with poor to no education will exacerbate the cost of this conflict.

Schools help shelter children from social risks. If a child is not at school, they are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, child recruitment, early marriage and pregnancy. It is believed that minority groups, people with disabilities and women suffer disproportionately from education being under attack. Greater education for all is a key driver in achieving equality. Hospitals and homes are being targeted too, meaning children caught up in the violence have reduced medical services available to them. Humanitarian agencies are struggling to respond to the displacement across North West Syria.

Attacking education facilities, especially higher education facilities, also exacerbates a nation’s ‘brain drain’ as teachers, academics and other education professionals leave the country in fear of their own safety. Teachers and education staff have also been frequently killed, arrested or abducted throughout the conflict. According to Save the Children, 1 in 5 teachers were displaced or killed in 2015. The country will need an educated middle class to rebuild.

For those whose priority is military and territorial victory, the targeting of schools is not in their interest either. These actions will only embitter the population to the forces who commit these crimes, as they will resent the forces who killed their children, destroyed their schools and stole their education. The targeting of civilians ultimately makes a political settlement to ending this conflict more unlikely and creates a situation where victory in this conflict can only be achieved through the wiping out of the enemy.

Outside of Syria, the amount of refugee children is placing huge strains on the education systems of neighbouring countries. Jordan and Lebanon, for example, have seen a huge amount of Syrian refugee children, in relation to children of national citizens, entering their education system. Refugees placing demand on government services, such as education, is leading to tension between the host communities.

As mentioned in the previous section, many children (and adults) will require

A Teacher’s Story

Reehab Hajawal has been teaching for a year in a school run by Syria Relief in the Idlib Governorate. Her passion is empowering women and girls, orphans and children with disabilities through the power of education. She is determined to keep going, despite the conflict. She speaks out about the issues facing Syrian teachers and pupils today:

"I work with orphans. I work with children with disabilities. I work with all children to help them develop their skills, gain knowledge and realise their dreams.

The greatest risks we face are from bombs and warplanes. Whenever we hear the warplane emergency siren, we have to stop teaching and make sure everyone is safe in case we get hit by an airstrike. This is really disrupts our ability to teach and the children’s potential to learn.

Another issue we face is displacement, when people flee from violence to here, like they are doing now, the schools in the host community are oversubscribed, their resources are stretched and the teachers have to spend a lot of time working with children who have to catch up due to the amount of school time they’ve missed. And being displaced is so traumatic for children, they are so frightened that they will be displaced again.

These children will grow up to become the teachers of the future. It is important that they learn in a high-quality learning environment.

"
mental health treatment to recover from the psychological impact of this conflict. This will cause even greater strain on Syria’s health services, on top of the countless physical conditions that will need to be dealt with as a result of this conflict. It is the next generation who will lead Syria in peacetime. The future for Syria as a nation, a society and economy is only as bright as the future of its children.

A HUMANITARIAN’S STORY

As Syria Relief’s Education Programme Coordinator, Mahmoud Shuyah is a world leading expert in providing education within the context of the Syrian conflict and the impact the fighting is having on Syria’s education system.

Through education, children are able to build resilience, and will learn how to develop positive coping mechanisms, as well as being able to access a better quality of life. People consider that things such as food and healthcare are lifesaving, however education is lifesaving also. It is a door to self-determination and self-development, it teaches us all how to become productive, caring, mature members of society. This is the reason every state provides education to its populace as without it, we are unable to become a society. Through education, scars from the past are healed, and lives are not only saved, but made.

Syrian schools are being targeted by air strikes on a regular basis, obviously when there are ceasefires; there is less shelling, when there is any escalation in violence; the insecurity and shelling increases. Unfortunately, a period of escalation occurs once or twice a year, and the current escalation in Idlib has been ongoing since April. We are seeing in these escalations, schools being routinely targeted. A school should be a place for peace, but unfortunately in this conflict, it is a target and it happens time and time again.

It is a living nightmare for the children, but tragically they are becoming used to it. This nightmare is the new normal for them. For education there are many mitigations that we, the schools, the community and the children are taking. This is usually through starting home-based education as the schools in conflict areas are sometimes deemed
not safe. Amazingly, despite the bombing children still want to learn, so we must keep going. The children tell us ‘even though there is bombing, we no longer fear death, we must learn. We will not stay ignorant for the rest of our lives, because of this war. We need to learn.

The conflict is contributing to a fall in literacy amongst school-aged children, because fewer children are in school, many are being displaced, some are in and out of school and a lot of those who are in school are traumatised. However, it is only short term. Once schools are running consistently without the interruption of conflict, the literacy rate rises again. This is having a direct impact on children's quality of education and learning outcomes.

When children experience the shelling of their school, or hear it happening to other schools, this often traumatises them. There were so many children who were not ready to go to school and we really helped tackle that with Syria Relief’s past Back To School campaigns, where we used outreach workers to help these children become emotionally and mentally ready to attend school. We had so many children who were displaced from different areas who came to us after being in their original school when it was hit, they'd seen their friends killed, their teachers killed, blood everywhere. And for a child, that is too hard to understand.

When children are witnessing horrific situations, it means that Syria Relief’s resources and staff are stretched even further as we want to work with these children and help them get ready to go back to school and psychosocial support takes up a lot of time and effort. The more intense the fighting, the more restricted humanitarian aid organisations are in the ways we can provide quality education to children. When the fighting worsens, the less I can think about methodologies to provide quality education, my concern is getting access and saving children's lives and keeping them protected.

Before the conflict, I was a student in Syria, we used to have corporal punishment, we used to have so many connections in military recruiting, we used to have so many gaps. I remember so many children who were beaten in a terrible way. And the schools were prisons and the teachers were just prison guards. Lessons were very boring. However, this was much better than the current situation when schools are under attack. Yet, I am optimistic that through Syria Relief, we can build schools back better. Syria Relief have brought in international NGO codes of conduct, child safeguarding, designing activities that can match with all levels of children. We are thinking for the first time about children with special needs. So even though we are in a terrible situation today. So even though we are in a terrible situation today, we find that when there is a ceasefire our schools flourish with creativity. When there is ceasefire that our schools flourish with creativity. But when the fighting starts again, the quality of education and the children's learning outcomes suffer, not to mention that it puts their lives in danger. I am motivated to not give up and always do my best for the children of Syria. As I am Syrian, and I can see what is happening to my people, seeing this destruction motivates me to work harder, to help more people and to do the best I can.

When asking ourselves what needs to be done, the immediate solution is an obvious one: Military actors need to stop bombing schools.

There are also other short-term actions that needs to take place; there needs to be greater financial support for schools within Syria. Syria Relief operates 164 schools across the country and we are helping to rebuild those that have been destroyed by the fighting. We need your help to do this, you can go to www.syriarelief.org.uk/appeals/back-to-school-appeal to donate to projects where you can help rebuild schools, help with running costs or support a child through education.

As mentioned previously, the deliberate targeting of schools is against international humanitarian law and international human rights law, efforts need to be put in place to ensure that all actors in the conflict obey this. In Syria there are multiple groups claiming to be the legitimate government of Syria or a legitimate government of a geographical section of Syria – all of these, without exception, should pass legislation that would ensure schools are protected from conflict, even in territory not held by them. As most of these governments have external backers who influence them, they too should pressure their allies within the conflict to pass and adhere to these legislations. At military level, orders must be issued from senior generals on all sides to guarantee the protection of schools and the necessary training must be given to military personnel in the detection and avoidance of education facilities.

Further to this, all of those claiming to be a government, should sign the Safe Schools Declaration, established in May 2015. Whilst it is not legally binding, it is a commitment to the protection of students, teachers and schools during conflict.

The international community needs to scrutinise the actions of all actors within the conflict to hold them to the internationally recognised standards, as there is a clear failing when it comes to the safeguarding of children, the protection of a child’s right to an education and military targeting. Also, more support needs to be provided to governments of host communities in bordering countries, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt, to ensure that children are given a quality education which will allow these refugees to gain skilled jobs and enter the workforce on their eventual return to Syria, the structure of the Syrian education system also needs to be kept in mind and the qualification awarded must either be applicable in Syria or Syria must begin to recognise them, for children to adapt if they should return.

If these actions are not taken, Syria will have a ‘lost generation.’
RefeRenCeS

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