

Bassil, 17, was paralyzed due to the violence.

He remembers going out for a stroll with two of his friends one morning in his neighbourhood in Homs, Syria, when a bomb hit them.

“ I still remember how it felt! My body was burning, I felt the heat all over.”

The attack killed one of his friends and paralyzed Bassil's legs. He left Syria and found refuge in Lebanon with his mother.

Since the attack, Bassil's life changed drastically.

“ I knew that nothing will ever be the same. I was no longer able to care for myself. I became restrained by everything around me!”

Despite the obstacles that he faced, his move to Lebanon marked a positive change for him.

“ Before I came here, I had no interest in life. Everyone saw only my wheelchair and never me.”

Bassil found solace in playing the violin. It became an extension of his body. Through weekly lessons and practice at the UNICEF-supported Al-Rahma centre in northern Lebanon, Bassil worked hard to turn his dream of becoming a musician into reality.

“ Whatever I was feeling, whether I was happy or sad, I was able to let the violin express these feelings for me. Today, when I play, I can make the violin laugh or cry for me.”

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“Before you operate on a child who has been disabled and disfigured by war, you can see that they are ashamed. They often try to hide their faces. As the surgery progresses, they become more confident.

If you can get a child with disabilities to a place in their healing where they can reintegrate into society – physically and psychologically – you spare them a lifetime of suffering and from becoming burden for families, communities and societies.”

Dr. Ghassan Abu-Sitti, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeon, American University of Beirut Medical Centre.

## Seven Years of war in Syria

# Disabled children : *Enabled futures*

### The irreparable damage of the war in Syria and the undefeatable determination of children

The seven-year long war in Syria continues to have a devastating impact on each and every child in Syria and in refugee host countries, with the effects of the crisis reverberating throughout the country, the region and the globe. Destruction, violence, displacement and death continue to tear apart every aspect of children's lives: their schools, their homes, their playgrounds and their neighbourhoods.

**The use of explosive weapons and indiscriminate attacks in densely populated urban areas have caused widespread destruction and limited people's access to vital medical services including psychosocial support. These factors and the overall impact of a seven-year war, family separations and displacement, have left scores of children with lifelong disabilities, both physical and mental.**

An estimated **3.3 million children** inside Syria are exposed to explosive hazards including landmines, unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices<sup>1</sup>. Over 1.5 million people are now living with permanent, war related disabilities, including 86,000 people whose injuries have led to amputations<sup>2</sup>. Lack of access to proper medical and psychological care has prolonged or worsened disabling injuries among children. Among **Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, 80 per cent of injuries were sustained as a direct consequence of the war**<sup>3</sup>.

In emergencies, children with disabilities are the **most vulnerable of the vulnerable**. Their needs risk being forgotten as the war continues, with no sign of respite. This vulnerability is made worse by the death of or separation from caregivers and the effects of war on the social fabric. Children with disabilities are **exposed to higher risks of violence and stigma** and face difficulties accessing basic services including health and education. Their families often lack the means or ability to provide children with the specialized care or equipment they need. For the millions of children who have had to flee their homes within Syria and in neighbouring countries, displacement has put those with existing disabilities closer to risks like road traffic, rivers and unexploded remnants of war. In refugee host countries inclusive services for children with disabilities are minimal and already under strain.

Last year, we thought that the situation of Syrian children had “hit rock bottom.” But we were wrong. The war on children in Syria continued unabated through 2017, with ruinous effects on children. **The number of children killed last year is more than 50 per cent higher than those killed in 2016**<sup>4</sup>. Unexploded remnants of war are contaminating the country. Disproportionate attacks in densely populated areas are killing a growing proportion of children who now account for one quarter of civilian deaths<sup>5</sup>. Over 360 children were injured in 2017, **leaving some with irreparable damage and lifelong disabilities**<sup>6</sup>. This is only the number that the United Nations was able to verify and actual numbers are likely to be much higher. Humanitarian access continues to be a challenge – attacks against humanitarian workers killed 21 people and injured 35<sup>7</sup>. In 2017, three times more children were recruited into the fighting than in 2015.

The United Nations verified 175 attacks on education and medical facilities and personnel in 2017, decimating the country's health and education systems<sup>8</sup>. This has hit children with disabilities the hardest, further depriving them of the specialized care and accessible facilities they need to turn their ambitions into reality.

Drained and exhausted from seven years of war, family resources inside Syria and neighbouring countries are running dangerously low, pushing families to extreme measures just to survive. Early marriage, child recruitment and child labour are on the rise across the board.

Nearly 5.5 million children have been displaced inside Syria or into bordering countries<sup>9</sup>. **Neighbouring countries, fragile themselves due to instability and economic stagnation, are hosting over 90 per cent of all refugees from Syria**<sup>10</sup>. The refugee flow has added a huge strain on service provision, challenging Syrian and host communities' access to basic services. For families who have children with disabilities, the burden is double.

But the devastating damage of seven years of war has not defeated the determination of the children of Syria. Despite suffering injuries, lifelong disability and displacement, their ambition knows no boundaries. When they and their families are provided with the support that they need, children have overcome their disabilities to achieve their goals. Amid the horrors of the war, many children have accomplished the extraordinary to reclaim some of their childhoods, dignity and dreams.

1 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), 2018, OCHA, 2017

2 WHO and Handicap International, 2017

3 Help Age International and Handicap International, Hidden Victims of the Syria Crisis: disabled, injured and older refugees, 2014

4 The United Nations, 2017

5 Guha-Sapir, Schluter, Rodrigo-Llanes, Lillywhite, Hsiao-Rei Hicks, Lancet Global Health, 2017

6 The United Nations, 2017

7 ibid

8 ibid

9 Syria HNO, 2018 and UNICEF, 2017

10 Of 5.5 million Syrian registered refugees worldwide, 5.3 million live in countries neighbouring Syria, Syria HNO 2018, 2017



Sami, 14, has two prosthetic legs and uses a wheelchair.

Originally from Dera'a in southern Syria, he was forced to flee the war and has been living in the Za'tari Refugee Camp in Jordan for the past four years.

Sami recalls playing in the snow with his cousins in his hometown when a bomb hit, killing his cousins and injuring him and his aunt. All he remembers is waking up in the hospital and wanting to walk. Except he couldn't. He lost his two legs.

“ When I was younger, I didn't like school, but in recent years I realized how important schools is – I really want to learn English.”

Because of his injury, Sami was forced to leave school to get medical treatment in Jordan. He has undergone two surgeries.

But his willpower can't be defeated.

“ No one is stronger than me. I want to paint and go to parties.”

Sami likes to draw comics.

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Hanaa, 8, was paralyzed by an exploding bomb in Aleppo. She now uses a wheelchair.

She remembers not wanting to leave her home for months after her injury.

“ I was scared and I couldn't play with my sisters.”

Then, volunteers from a UNICEF-supported child friendly space in Aleppo, brought her to the centre to play, sing, and draw.

Hanaa had dropped out of school for a year but she returned to continue her education. She loves learning to read, write, and do maths.

She also goes to physiotherapy three times a week and she is happy that she is getting better little by little.

Hanaa has two wishes:

“ My dream is to become a physiotherapist to help children like me. And my big dream is for peace to return to my country.”

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## AN APPEAL FOR CHILDREN

Children with disabilities affected by the conflict in Syria are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. Their conditions require specialized treatment and services. As children, their needs differ from those of adults: as their bodies and abilities change, so must their care. These children face a very real risk of being forgotten as the unrelenting conflict continues.

On behalf of Bassil, Hanaa and Sami and all children affected by the conflict in Syria, UNICEF is asking all parties to the conflict, those who have influence over them and the international community for the following actions for children:

**Invest** in providing lifesaving support and long-term rehabilitation services for children in Syria and its neighbouring countries. An emergency of this unprecedented scale requires an unprecedented response – the crisis cannot continue to be addressed as it has to date.

**Improve** access to inclusive basic services including health and nutrition, education, child protection and water inside Syria and in neighbouring countries. Access to these services has been severely limited inside Syria, while in the fragile neighbouring countries, the flow of refugees had added a huge strain on service delivery to Syrian and host community families.

**Strengthen** the ability of families to cope with the impact of seven years of war. Financial assistance to families is critical to support children with disabilities, address school dropouts and prevent child marriage and child labour.

**Provide** flexible, unrestricted, multi-year funding to meet the needs of children, including those with disabilities and their families to increase their access to specialized services in Syria and in neighbouring countries. To support children affected by the war, UNICEF requires US\$ 1.3 billion in 2018.

**Support** reconstruction and recovery efforts by prioritising the needs of children, including children with disabilities. Beyond bricks and stones, recovery and long standing peace is about re-stitching the torn social fabric and bringing back a culture of tolerance and diversity to hold communities together.

**Put an end** to grave violations against children including killing, maiming, recruitment, and attacks on schools and hospitals. Children who survive these attacks are often left with lifelong disabilities and have little resources for specialized support.

**End the war** through a political solution and lift all restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid. However, as crucial as the delivery of assistance is, it will not bring a solution to the crisis in Syria, nor will it put an end to the war.



"I have lived with a quarter of my body. My legs were amputated in my very early childhood. I have been through more than one operation. I focus on the many things that I already have and can use to be positive and reach my goals.

I'm expressing my solidarity with the children of Syria impacted by war. I wish them a better future."

Ghanim Al Muftah, 16 from Qatar, a student, humanitarian and a children's rights activist. He was born with Caudal Regression Syndrome, a rare disorder which impairs the development of the lower spine. Ghanim and his family launched the *Ghanim Almuftah Foundation for Peace and Prosperity*, to encourage physically disabled people to integrate into mainstream society.

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**Disabled children**  
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