

# Syrian Refugee Crisis: Ensuring an Entire Generation is Not Lost

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Since its beginning over a decade ago, the Syrian Civil War has left 13.4 million Syrians in need of humanitarian and protection assistance. The Syrian Refugee crisis has grown to such a degree that more than half of Syria's population is now displaced. The most dramatic effects are being exhibited in future generations, as 80% of refugee children have suffered a family death and 60% have been a victim of a physical attack. The situation has altogether left over 50% of refugee children with mental health traumas such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression. This paper will examine the roots of these issues while also taking a step back to look at the broader picture for what can be done to combat the developments seen to ensure the current Syrian generation has a future.

## Introduction

On the 15th of March, 2011 the Syrian Civil War officially began. Since its beginning, it has found more than half of Syria's population displaced with 13.4 million in need of humanitarian and protection assistance (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). The continued conflict and lack of security faced by the Syrian community have had tremendous consequences, and as the conflict passes a decade, refugee children have been unfathomably distraught. Nearly 80% have suffered a family death and 60% have personally fallen victim to a physical attack (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). Statistics, however, cover up the bigger story as over half of refugee children have been clinically diagnosed with diseases such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Altogether these findings illustrate the destructive impact the lasting conflict in Syria has continued to have on Syrian refugees across the globe as well as the dire need to provide aid to the suffering Syrians of today to ensure there exists a Syria tomorrow.

## Literature Review

The Syrian refugee crisis has universally been recognized as astronomical. Producing 6.8 million refugees, there is no question that the influx of refugees into foreign lands has a tremendous impact both on those who are forced to turn and call a new land home and on the countries which they enter. This dual impact is analyzed by many including Dany Bahar who argues that a mutually beneficial relationship is the perfect description of the current situation which the world finds itself facing (Bahar, 2018). Bahar focuses on the economic implications of an influx of refugees into a country, examining both the perspective of a refugee as well as the country they seek refuge in. He concludes that from the perspective of a refugee escaping a war-torn country, the right to work and an education can serve as the first step towards a productive life as they integrate into their new country's labor force (Bahar, 2018). From the country's standpoint, Bahar believes the presence of foreign workers can foster international trade and investments which would be beneficial for the country accepting refugees. However, these conclusions miss a variety of key points. Blinded by his focus on the economy, Bahar arbitrarily states, "It is a

win for the refugees for obvious reasons: The earlier a state commits to protecting refugees, the earlier they can move forward with their lives" while completely ignoring the challenges faced by refugees such as loss of cultural identity, generational difficulties with assimilation, and the trauma of being forced into a foreign land that refugees are forced to face on a daily basis (Bahar, 2018, p.1).

More importantly, Bahar's argument carries the fundamental flaw of assuming that when a refugee is forced out of Syria, they immigrate into an affluent country and will naturally reap the benefits of a developed nation's policies. In reality, millions of Syrian refugees are displaced into struggling communities and ill-resourced refugee camps. These camps, though meant to be safe havens, are empirically proven to be holistically harmful. The US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health studied the physiological and psychological health of Syrian refugees in comparison to that of residents within Jordan and other neighboring countries. The study looked at low socioeconomic status Jordanians (LSES) and average socioeconomic status Jordanians (ASES) and used the World Health Organization Quality of Life instrument (WHOQOL-BREF) questionnaire to gather data. Following the experiments, it was found that although the physiological health of Syrian refugees in comparison to LSES was similar, there was a stark difference in the psychological scores and even more so when compared with the ASES group (Abdo et al., 2019). These findings bring to light the tremendous impact being displaced can have on refugees, proving psychological damage to be more severe than living in poverty and that the idealistic viewpoint of refugee assimilation is simply that—an idealistic myth.

The consequences of living in refugee camps are contextualized by the article "What's life like in a Syrian refugee camp? (Muslim Aid)". The author examines the variety of difficulties faced by refugees on a day-to-day basis, including inadequate medical care, overcrowded schools limiting youth education, and lack of employment opportunities, helping bring to light the inhumane conditions helpless refugees are being subjected to (Muslim Aid, n.d). Realities such as, "Most of us prioritize our children's education, however parents in Syrian

refugee camps have no resource that would allow them to send their children to school (Muslim Aid, n.d, 1),” stress that for Syrians, the commodities so many take for granted are not equally afforded; ultimately leading to a degradation in their quality of life.

These adverse impacts, however, are not unique to refugees surviving within camps. For those “fortunate” enough to escape into foreign, more affluent lands, the impacts can prove equally destructive. While traveling to teach within Europe, Rachel McCormick, an English professor, came to grasp the magnitude of the refugee crisis while visiting schools within the Netherlands. The tremendous hill refugees were forced to climb to maintain their birth language and identity proved to be one that most refugees are simply unable to climb because of their circumstances. In particular, McCormick turns to the United States to highlight how the educational system put in place pushes immigrants away from their native tongue. Presenting US statistics, she points out that the current educational agenda pushes students to learn English in lieu of and not in cohesion with their Arabic native tongue (Hamilton, 2016). Altogether, this demonstrates that refugees are not met with open arms but instead are pushed to conform and lose their cultural identity—an implicit cultural erasure that has proven to bear negative consequences as they grow older.

The negative ramifications the civil war has brought about, however, are not unique to those who have been forced to leave their lands. In “*A look into the mental health crisis in Syria*” by the International Rescue Committee, an interview of 27-year-old Abdullah within Syria gives a firsthand perspective on the impact the conflict has had within Syria’s borders. Abdullah stated that, “depression and other mental health problems are rampant across Idlib,” finding that “More than 50 percent of Syria’s population is in need of mental health support” (International Rescue Committee (IRC), 2018, 1). Even beyond the numbers, he elaborates on the impact the war has had on his own family explaining that he and his siblings constantly battle the psychological turmoil of having lost a brother. His sister was diagnosed with depression and his younger brothers were left with “no future because there are no schools left” (IRC, 2018, 2).

No matter where Syrians find themselves, whether still in the country, in a nearby refugee camp, or in a foreign country, the trauma which haunts them, stemming from the conflict in their homeland proves to know no boundaries. Thus, the question remains: “what’s next?” This notion is tackled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies which argues that to ensure an entire generation of Syrians is not lost due to a conflict, it is imperative action is taken to help those who are affected. Primarily, Isra Hussein focuses on the traumatic mental health repercussions which have ensued as a result of continued conflict, namely the higher rates of school dropout and failure, as well as higher rates of delinquent behavior as a result of exposure to violence. Hussein contends that these repercussions will continue to pull down the upcoming Syrian generation, potentially to the point of no return, unless we can take the first steps to-

wards examining the root cause of their issues and addressing Syrian mental health (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), n.d). These first steps are further deemed necessary by Aining Liang who, whilst contextualizing the current state of aid, points out that what the refugees have available to them is simply not enough and that more has to be done to help them if the world hopes to not see an entire generation fall.

In the face of such calamity, it becomes imperative that resolutions be discussed such that not all hope is lost. One such solution is to integrate refugee families into communities in a manner that allows for their health needs to be addressed explicitly. The positive health outcomes of such an endeavor can be seen in study of cultural/religious oriented treatments in Bosnian Muslim refugee communities: a population known to suffer from PTSD due to a history of war and genocide (Snyder et al., 2005). Researchers found that within the Bosnian community, there seems to be tremendous benefit from interventions that build on community strengths and where

goals are community oriented and allow for the individuals to work together in a community setting (Snyder et al., 2005). In order to reach this ideal, a plausible first step was explored, in detail, in a case study of Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq conducted by Dr. Abdallah Yassen, a lecturer of public international law at the Erbil Polytechnic University. Dr. Yassen, following a 4-month multi-site qualitative and participatory method, found that healthcare access for refugees is insufficient (Yassen, 2019). For physical ailments, refugees currently residing in camps are often-

times left lacking sufficient medical treatment and adequate prescriptions due to the limitations of the permanent healthcare centers (PHC) (Yassen, 2019). The ramifications for this are then magnified by findings that the years of trauma and poor conditions both in and out of camps have left 32% of Syrian families with a member(s) with serious medical conditions that require aid support. As a result, it was concluded that local integration (not assimilation) would prove beneficial for a multitude of reasons, most notably for healthcare as the establishment of residency creates a foothold for naturalization, helping to entitle refugees with basic rights (Yassen, 2019).

## Discussion

The Syrian refugee crisis has affected millions of people both within and outside of Syria and its impact continues to rise as the conflict prolongs. The adverse effects it has had on the Syrian community have been incalculable and the health effects—primarily mentally—it has had on the younger generation is nearing a point of no return. These findings are empirically found in a cross-national survey of Syrian immigrants across the United States which across generations found a steep decline in national identity. Out of 170+ surveyed it was found that 51% of Syrian immigrants would consider reentering the land while 49% would never step foot into the country again. Although at first glance these findings seem to be expected, with an even split for and against revisiting, when we take a closer look at the intricacies of these findings, we see an entirely different story. Although the

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two groups seemingly put different answers, in reality the opinions shared were very similar. Of those who cited never wishing to return to the land, over 97% cited the political situation and subsequently lack of safety as their reason for not wanting to return. Although this would have been expected based on the group, what becomes rather surprising is that within the group that cited wanting to return to their homeland, nearly 70% reported that they would only consider returning to the land if there was a change in regime. Despite being initially perplexing, these findings actually prove to be extremely predictable as it highlights the drastic impact of the Syrian Civil War. The impact has been so severe and widespread that its knowledge no longer knows bounds. Whether they carry pride in their national identity and have retained their cultural heritage or have chosen to turn their backs towards a brighter future in a foreign land, the inhumane developments within Syria have thrown millions into life sentences for circumstances outside of their control. If we don't act now to relieve these developments, the day will come when we no longer have the ability to fix what has been broken.

### Conclusion

For many fortunate enough to live in more affluent regions of the world, primarily the West, the Syrian humanitarian crisis has in many ways become a regular part of our everyday lives. Images on WhatsApp of overcrowded hospitals, leveled buildings, and crying children are regularly shared, death tolls in the hundreds and even thousands are mentioned in less than monotone voices on the TV. This insensitivity has hijacked our humanity, and if not eliminated, will further continue to destroy the Syrian communities across the globe, until the Syrian diaspora is ultimately lost.

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