

EDUCATION UNDER FIRE

HOW CONFLICT
IS DRIVING
CHILDREN
OUT OF SCHOOL
ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST



In the midst of violence and instability, school is a place of learning and opportunity, a sanctuary for healing and health, and a haven of normalcy and hope for the future. Education not only increases the chances that, someday, children will be able to support themselves and seek a better life for their families; it also provides them with the skills to rebuild their societies. And it can instill in them a desire to seek reconciliation when the conflicts have been resolved and the catastrophes have ended."

Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director - July 3, 2015



© AFP PHOTO/MAHMUD HAMS
September 2014: Students in a war-damaged classroom at a school in Gaza City on the first day of the new academic year.



© AFP PHOTO / AMC / ZEIN AL-RIFAI
April, 2015: A Syrian child walks past a pool of blood at the entrance of the Saad Ansari school in the Syrian city of Aleppo following a reported air strike that killed five children and four other civilians. AFP PHOTO / AMC / ZEIN AL-RIFAI

The images are as arresting as they are incongruous: the pool of fresh blood in the corner of a playground; the shrapnel-scarred blackboard inside a rubble-strewn classroom; the heavily-armed gunmen striding between the rows of empty desks.

From Syria to Sudan, from Libya to Yemen, as conflict and political violence surge across the Middle East, schools – and the children and teachers that use them – are finding themselves in the line of fire.

A region which – until just a few short years ago – had the goal of universal education well within reach, today faces a disastrous situation: More than **13 million children** are not attending school in countries being affected - either directly or indirectly - by armed conflict*.

The impact is felt in different ways, all of them painful. It is estimated that there are more than **8,850 schools** in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya that can no longer be used because they have been damaged, destroyed, are sheltering displaced families or are occupied by parties to the conflicts¹.

In the Gaza Strip, children use school buildings as shelters because their homes have been destroyed. In Iraq, schools accommodate some of the three million people forced to flee conflict. Across Syria, much of Libya, Sudan and Yemen, parents are not sending their children to school for fear of what might happen to them along the way - or at school itself.

This report looks at the impact of conflict on the education of children in nine countries*, most notably those where, since 2011, instability and conflict have forced millions of people to flee their homes.

The conflict in **Syria** has displaced 7.6 million people inside the country², and driven more than four million refugees abroad, mainly to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan³. Families from Syria and Iraq have featured strongly among the desperate migrants arriving in Europe in recent months - and among those who perished in the attempt.

In the **State of Palestine**, hostilities in the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014 caused massive destruction to infrastructure including schools, and left deep scars in the psyche of children and their caregivers.

* *Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, State of Palestine, Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.*

1 Multiple sources confirmed by UNICEF

2 OCHA, 2014

3 UNHCR, 2015

In **Yemen**, the intensification of violence since last March is bringing an already fragile country to the verge of collapse. As of August 2015, thousands of schools were closed and at least 1.8 million children were without an education⁴. This is in addition to more than 1.6 million who were out of school before the conflict escalated⁵. Ongoing violence has caused immense damage to civilian infrastructure and disrupted access to basic services. Acute shortages of food and fuel have left more than 80% of the population in need of assistance and forced around 1.5 million people to move internally, with some taking refuge in neighbouring countries⁶.

In **Libya**, the escalation of violence since May 2014 has led to civilian casualties, considerable displacement, destruction of public infrastructure and the disruption of basic services including education. It is estimated that two million people, almost one-third of the total population, have been affected by the conflict⁷. More than 434,000 people are internally displaced⁸.

Less noticed but just as devastating for children has been the long-running conflict in **Sudan**. Currently, some 2.9 million people are estimated to have been displaced by the conflict⁹.

Conflicts wipe out years of investment and achievements in education and can cripple the development of education systems. The effect of violence and insecurity in Iraq and Yemen is clear, as educational achievements for children have fallen steadily¹⁰. In countries like Syria, the conflict has reversed more than two decades of expansion of access to education¹¹.

**13 MILLION+ CHILDREN
ARE NOT GOING TO SCHOOL
DUE TO CONFLICTS IN THE REGION**

4 UNICEF News Note, July 2015

5 UNICEF Yemen country report on out-of-school children, 2014

6 UNICEF, Humanitarian Action for Children, July 2015

7 Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS), Libya Humanitarian Impact of the Conflict, June 2015

8 UNHCR, June 2015

9 The United Nations, Humanitarian Response Plan for Sudan, January 2015

10 UNESCO – Education For All Monitoring Report, 2011

11 UNICEF (forthcoming) Education Sector Analysis

How conflict devastates the hopes and futures of children in the Middle East.

“Life was too difficult, so we had to leave Syria. There was no electricity and we had to use candles. We were really afraid, it was so dark.”

Rand, 13-years old, originally from Idlib, Syria; now a refugee in Turkey.

Sadly, Rand’s story is not unique. In Syria, the Gaza Strip, Iraq, Libya, Sudan or Yemen, millions of children experience conflict in different ways, leaving indelible scars whether physical or psychological. Simply going to school for many children is fraught with danger. Being in school can be a death sentence. In 2014 alone, there were 214 attacks on schools in the region¹².

I heard the noise, everyone was running. I saw my mother waiting at the corner. We ran together. I was happy to be home. This is all what I can remember.

Rasha, fourth grade student, describes the bombing outside her school in Homs, Syria.

Conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa have reached new levels of destructiveness and horror. The killing, abduction and arbitrary arrest of students, teachers and education personnel have become commonplace. In Yemen recently, 13 educators and four of their children were reportedly killed in a single attack on a teachers’ office in Amran¹³.

Education facilities have been occupied and used as bases or detention centres by armed groups and forces¹⁴.

As conflict drives more families towards destitution, children are increasingly exploited, forced to leave school and take up jobs often in poor conditions and for minimal wages. Girls as young as 13 are being pushed towards marriage to relieve economic strains on their families¹⁵.

In **Syria**, the failure to resolve an increasingly brutal conflict is threatening an entire generation of children, and the education system is paying a massive price.

One in four schools cannot be used because they have been damaged, destroyed, or are being used as shelters for the internally displaced or for military purposes. The lack of safe learning environments coupled with a number of other factors (unsafe routes to and from school, discrimination, insecurity, displacement, shortages of teachers and supplies) have meant that more than two million children are out of school and 446,000 are at a risk of dropping out¹⁶.

12 Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council (A/69/926–S/2015/409), June 2015

13 UNICEF statement, August 2015

14 Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, Education Under Attack, 2014

15 UNICEF and Save the Children, Small Hands, Heavy Burden, July 2015

16 UNICEF, August 2015

In the reality of Syria today, at least 20% of children have to cross active lines of conflict just to take their examinations¹⁷.

Educators and their parents go to great lengths to have the education of their children endorsed. Some report taking a perilous journey, passing through countless checkpoints manned by armed fighters.

In neighbouring countries where Syrian children have sought refuge, more than 700,000 children are not in school, especially in Turkey and Lebanon¹⁸. Schools receiving Syrian children are over-crowded and under-resourced. In some cases schools are far and parents are not able to pay for the transportation. Syrian refugee children struggle to adapt to the host country curriculum and to the local language and dialect.

I had one ten year-old Syrian student who kept skipping Turkish class. It took a long time until he was convinced that he needed to learn the language.

Ra’ed, teacher in a refugee camp in Turkey.

2014 was the deadliest year for **Iraq** since 2008¹⁹. Nearly 700 children were killed and another 500 injured²⁰. The displacement of over three million Iraqis has put huge strain on an already inadequate education infrastructure. At least 950,000 school children are affected²¹.

Last year, around 1,200 schools in host communities have been taken over as collective shelters. Up to nine families shared each classroom, hanging laundry in the hallways, preparing meals in the courtyard, and sleeping where students once studied. This delayed the start of the last school year.

It was painful to see these desperate families, but I was equally worried for my students not being able to start school on time.

Zaya Yohanka, a school principal in Dohuk, northern Iraq.

17 UNICEF, In Syria taking school exams across conflict lines, June 2015

18 UNICEF, August 2015

19 UNAMI Statement, January 2015

20 Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council (A/69/926–S/2015/409), June 2015

21 OCHA, Iraq Crisis Situation Report, January 2015



©UNICEF/AL-BABA
July 2014: A Palestinian boy sifts through the rubble of his destroyed home in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip.

Even before conflict escalated in **Yemen** earlier this year, the country had around 1.6 million out of school children aged 6-11²². Currently, with no end in sight to the conflict, over 1.8 million children have had their access to school interrupted. More than 3,500 schools - about a quarter of the total - have been shut down and some 600,000 children have not been able to take their exams²³.

I have seen children trying to write on the ground because they want to learn so much.

Jameela, head teacher in a school in Sa'ada, northern Yemen.

In the **Gaza Strip**, children have lived through three major military confrontations in six years. During 51 days of conflict in the summer of 2014, at least 551 Palestinian children were killed – far more than in the two previous military operations combined²⁴. A further 3,370 children were injured; many will struggle with lifelong disability²⁵.

When the 2014-2015 school year started, nearly half a million children were unable to return to learning for several weeks because of the damage inflicted on schools and other education facilities. At least 281 schools suffered minor to severe damage, while eight were completely destroyed²⁶.

My children were injured in a school. They saw people injured with missing hands or legs, with wounded faces and eyes. They saw their father killed. They no longer see school as a safe place.

Niveen, a mother of two from Gaza.

In **Libya**, intensive fighting in 2011 resulted in prolonged disruption to the education system and damage to school facilities and equipment. Since the resurgence in fighting in 2014, more than half of internally displaced and returnees in the east of the country reported that their children do not attend school. In addition, many schools in the north-east and south of the country are reported to be hosting internally displaced people²⁷.

In the eastern city of Benghazi, enrolment rates dropped by 50%. Out of 239 schools, only 65 are functioning²⁸.

22 UNICEF, Yemen country report on out-of-school children, 2014

23 UNICEF, Yemen Humanitarian Situation Report, August 2015

24 According to the Secretary General's Report on Children and Armed Conflict, 374 children were killed in the Gaza Strip in 2009, while 46 were killed in 2012

25 Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council (A/69/926-S/2015/409), June 2015

26 UNICEF, Six months after ceasefire, children of Gaza trapped in trauma, February 2015

27 SCelta Assessment Report; Save the Children Egypt, Libya, Tunisia Assessments, June 2015

28 Libya Multi-Sector Needs Assessment, 2014

MORE THAN 8,850 SCHOOLS ACROSS THE REGION CAN NO LONGER BE USED

One of the results of nearly four decades of war in **Sudan** has been to leave more than three million children out of school²⁹. In Darfur and in the states of Blue Nile and South Kordofan conflict has been a major factor pushing children out of the classroom. Other factors include poor school infrastructure, lack of security, and the costs that are too high for many poor families.

We were in school when we heard the sound of an explosion outside. The whole class was crying and the teacher asked us to run home. We left behind our bags and books.

Tasera, 8, from Um Gona in south Darfur.

Since December 2013, Sudan has hosted around 50,000 refugee children from South Sudan who have fled the violence in their country; just one third of these school-aged children receive any education³⁰.

Such statistics tell only one side of the story, however. Even in the worst of circumstances, children want the opportunity to go to school and learn.

My happiest day was when I received my sixth grade certificate and realized that I got a 95% average! My parents were so proud. My friends and relatives were surprised that despite the war last year and the damage done to our home I managed to get a better average than the previous year.

Salsabeel, 11, student in Gaza.



IN 2014 ALONE 214 SCHOOLS WERE ATTACHED ACROSS THE REGION

29 UNICEF, Sudan country report on out-of-school children, 2014

30 UNHCR, Sudan Indicators, February 2015



©UNICEF/
April 2015: Classrooms at the Ibn Sina School in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a show damage after an air strike. The school, which has 1,500 girl students, is closed indefinitely.



©UNICEF/ Diffidenti
February 2012: A shell hole scars the wall of a primary school classroom in the Libyan city of Sirte following weeks of fighting there.

Teachers in the line of fire

In times of conflict, the role of teachers, guiding, inspiring and encouraging the children in their charge, takes on a very different dimension, requiring added dedication and even physical courage. As violence has swept across much of the Middle East, the teaching profession has found itself in the firing line time and again. Teachers have been detained or intimidated, injured and sometimes killed. It is no surprise then that many have abandoned their jobs and fled for their lives³¹.

Syria's teachers have paid a particularly heavy price. Since the beginning of the crisis, almost one quarter of the country's teaching personnel - some 52,500 teachers and 523 school counsellors have left their posts³². Even those Syrian teachers who have ended up as refugees in other countries have faced other obstacles which prevent them from working.

Teachers in **Iraq** tell their own stories of loss and survival. In the northern city of Mosul, school principal Eman Farag lost three of her brothers to violence as well as her family home. In June 2014, she fled to Kirkuk where she now runs a school for 900 displaced children.

These things did not stop me. They motivated me to continue. We have problems, but we'll find solutions.

Eman Farag, Iraqi school principal.

When teachers abandon their posts, the remaining staff have to cope with the educational and psychosocial needs of their students. The impact of war and violence can impair these teachers' own ability to perform. Meanwhile, there are other challenges specific to each country.

In **Sudan**, limited investment in the education sector has resulted in a serious lack of trained teachers, affecting the quality of teaching. Teachers are often unwilling to serve in remote rural areas, such as those inhabited by nomadic people, which may contribute to the high number of out of school children.

In **Yemen**, some teachers lack the qualifications necessary to lead classrooms and, as long as the country remains unstable, the education sector will continue to be affected.

In the **Gaza Strip**, overcrowded classrooms and overwhelming workloads exacerbate teaching stress while the lack of educational facilities puts greater burden on the teachers.



31 Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council (A/69/926-S/2015/409), June 2015

32 UNICEF, Curriculum, Accreditation and Certification for Syrian Children, March 2014

Syrian children face additional challenges to continue and complete their education³³

Schools are over-burdened and now this situation has made it worse. Families are demanding schools for their children. They don't want anything else.

Iman Abdullah, UNICEF Education Officer

Aside from its visible impact on school buildings and infrastructure, the conflict in Syria has placed formidable obstacles in the path of children trying to pursue and complete their education, both inside the country and in the surrounding countries where four million refugees have found sanctuary.

With the crisis now in its fifth year, basic public services inside Syria - including education - have been stretched to breaking point.

In most areas that are under the Government's control, public education services have been maintained: most schools remain open, the official Syrian curriculum is followed and exams take place. However, in areas with a large influx of displaced students, many school-aged children do not attend class, often because the schools are overcrowded, or because they do not have the official documents they need to register.

In contested areas, where fighting is taking place, children and teachers do not go to school, or do so irregularly. In addition, many schools have been damaged or destroyed.

In areas controlled by opposition groups, education services often continue, using the official Syrian curriculum, but with some subjects removed.

In areas of Syria under the control of the so-called Islamic State (Da'esh), a revised version of the curriculum is in use, with several subjects removed, and with additional regulations for girl students.

In the five main countries hosting Syrian refugees, Syrian children have generally been allowed to access public schools. Governments have shown generosity towards Syrian children, but the demands have far outstretched their limited resources.

Other challenges have emerged too: In Turkey, Syrian students must cope with Turkish as the language of instruction. In Lebanon, where even prior to the crisis, the public education system accommodated only 30 per cent of school-age children, Syrian children compete for school places with vulnerable Lebanese children. In Jordan, the capacity of the public education system is also seriously overstretched.

Syrian children living as refugees in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon have also reported physical violence and bullying in schools.

I was in fifth grade when the crisis started and I haven't been back to school since.

Firas, 16, Syrian refugee in Za'atari camp, Jordan

As the conflict has dragged on, different adaptations of the Syrian official school curriculum have emerged, both inside the country and in countries hosting refugees. In Lebanon and Jordan, the Syrian curriculum used is a little different from the official version, however it is not done so with the approval of authorities. In Turkey, more systemic changes were made by the Syrian opposition and the revised version of the Syrian curriculum is accredited by the Turkish Government.

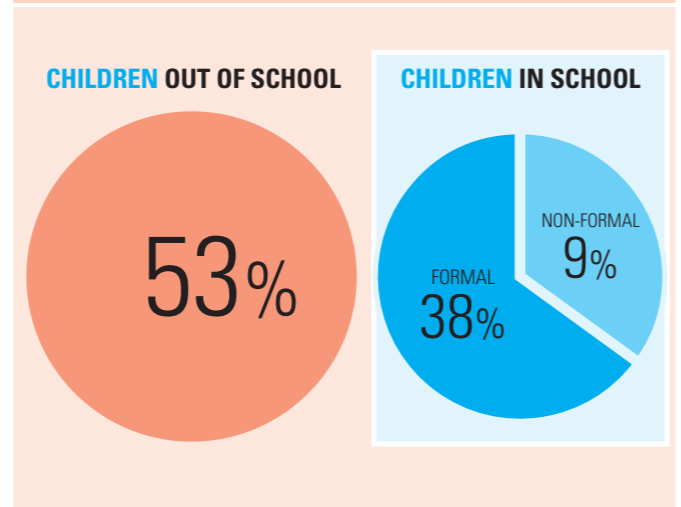
The complex issue of certification poses an additional hurdle for Syrian children to surmount. Students in Syria receive national diplomas or certificates as long as they study the national curriculum and pass the formal examinations, which can entail lengthy travel in dangerous circumstances (See page 4).

The war has totally disrupted my schooling. For example, to sit for my exams, I had to travel to Hama. It took more than 14 hours to get there.

Amina, 9th grade Syrian student.

When it comes to Syrian refugee children in neighbouring countries, although there are national recognition agreements between Syria and neighbouring countries, there are concerns that the crisis may impact the recognition of education certificates.

SYRIAN CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL IN FIVE MAIN REFUGEE HOST COUNTRIES*



* Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt.

33 UNICEF, Curriculum, Accreditation and Certification for Syrian Children, March 2014



©AFP PHOTO/PHILIPPE DESMAZES
October 2012: Syrian rebels take position in a classroom at an empty school in Aleppo.

Responding to the educational needs of children in conflict-affected countries

The No Lost Generation Initiative

Launched in 2013, the No Lost Generation Initiative brought together a wide range of partners from the United Nations, non-governmental organisations and international donors. The broad objective is to expand access to learning and provide a protective environment for children and adolescents in Syria and neighbouring countries. The initiative puts education and child protection at the centre of the humanitarian response generating critical funding to what are often under-funded sectors in emergencies. Among the key results so far:

- In Syria, the initiative supported the establishment of 600 school clubs where children can catch up on classes they missed.
- In Jordan, the initiative helped increase children's enrolment in formal and non-formal education.
- In Lebanon, the government and its partners have committed to provide education to an average of 413,000 Syrian children and vulnerable Lebanese children every year for the next two years.

Back-to-learning Campaigns

Across the region and in conflict hit countries, UNICEF and partners have provided support to regular "Back to Learning" campaigns, distributing education supplies and establishing temporary learning spaces to be used while rapid repairs of damaged schools are undertaken.

One campaign in Jordan involved volunteers who travelled throughout the country raising awareness on the importance and procedures for enrolment through door-to-door visits, the distribution of information material and enlisting the support of religious and local leaders.

Following the 51-day hostilities in Gaza, UNICEF launched a comprehensive 'Back to School Campaign' in partnership with the Ministry of Education & Higher Education to ensure the safe return to school of some 260,000 children in government schools. UNICEF distributed teaching and recreational kits to 395 government schools and prior to their opening supported the training of 11,000 teachers on classroom management and psychosocial support.

Expanded Learning Spaces

In 2014, UNICEF and other agencies in the Global Partnership for Education Accelerated Support Fund rehabilitated 139 damaged schools in six Yemeni governorates, providing safe and suitable learning environment for 68,000 children.

The schools were provided with student desk-and-bench sets, school administration office furniture and other supplies to replace looted or damaged items.

Self-learning

In **Syria**, UNICEF, UNRWA and education partners have jointly designed and developed a self-learning programme in line with the national curriculum. The self-learning materials are designed to allow condensed and fast-tracked learning for children who have missed out on regular schooling.

This initiative allows out-of-school children to access the national curriculum and continue learning even in areas where conflict has been heaviest or where schools are closed. It relies on a community-based approach to encourage children to study at home or in local centres using the developed materials.

In **Iraq**, supplementary learning materials were developed to support children who are temporarily out of school. The materials are currently being utilized in camps hosting displaced communities.

E-learning

For countries and regions in conflict, and where normal schooling is disrupted, e-learning offers obvious attractions. It reduces the need for students to travel (and expose themselves to danger). It also does away with the need for printed materials.

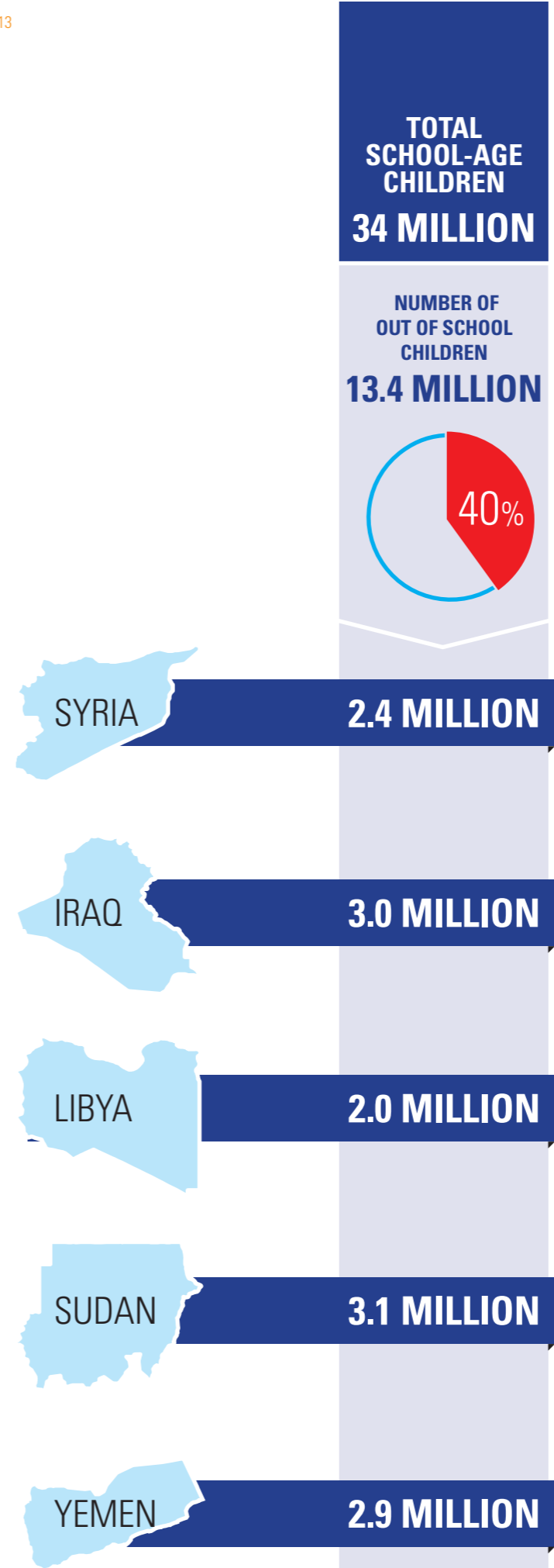
However, the need for access to the internet and power to charge the learning devices must also be taken into account.

One initiative now in development is the "Virtual School for Education in Crises" (or *Sahabati*, 'my cloud' in Arabic). Originally conceived for countries affected by the Syria crisis, *Sahabati* is designed to provide children and adolescents affected by conflict in the region with the opportunity to continue their education and receive certification for their learning, irrespective of their location and the schooling time they have lost.

The initiative will be rolled out through an online learning platform that will host an Arabic language curriculum of four core subjects: Arabic, English, Math and Science with a system of online assessments and certification.

In **Lebanon**, UNICEF has been working on innovative solutions to bring education to vulnerable children. Working with the International Education Association, the Raspberry Pi computer, a hand held device on which children learn numeracy skills and basic programming was used.

In three of **Sudan's** poorest states, with neither the infrastructure nor the budget to provide education through traditional means, an accelerated learning curriculum is being piloted in remote villages, using digitized content available on solar-powered low-cost tablets. The project aims to reintegrate children into schools through an accelerated e-learning programme.



©UNICEF/ Noorani
Sitting on mats on sandy floors, girls read from their textbooks at Salam #9 Primary School for Girls in Abu Shouk camp for Internally Displaced People (IDP).

The hopes of a generation are at stake

As the violence gripping Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya continues to deepen, and with no end in sight to other, more enduring conflicts in Palestine and Sudan, there is every reason to fear that the huge number of children already out of school across the region will continue to grow.

With more than 13 million children already driven from classrooms by conflict, it is no exaggeration to say that the educational prospects of a generation of children are in the balance.

The forces that are crushing individual lives and futures are also destroying the prospects for an entire region. Young minds distorted by hatred and fear will need extraordinary support to contribute fully to the development of societies built on social progress, tolerance and prosperity.

Across the region, children demand above all else to go back to school. They dream of a better future for themselves and their families, and of the day when they can help rebuild their shattered communities and nations. These are the future teachers, nurses, doctors, architects, musicians, scientists and technicians of Syria, Iraq, the State of Palestine, Sudan, Libya and Yemen.

Like children anywhere, they want an opportunity to learn, and acquire the skills they need to fulfil their potential. Among them are the future leaders of these conflict-hit countries.

These children are laying down a challenge to the international community, host governments, policy makers, and all those who want to see the Middle East and North Africa emerge from the current turmoil. By undertaking the measures outlined below, they can together contribute to a better future for the region and steer millions of children from the despair, hopelessness and darkness which threatens them and their societies.

1 Work to reduce the number of children out of school

Expand informal education services to cater to the millions of children who are out of school. Further efforts to be undertaken to reach vulnerable children, including girls and boys being kept at home, working, involved in other forms of exploitation or directly involved in conflicts.

2 Support partners and national systems

Provide more support to national education systems in conflict-hit countries and among the host communities to improve and expand learning space, recruit and train teachers, provide learning materials and engage in innovative learning modalities.

3 Accreditation and certification

In countries affected by the crisis in Syria, advocate for the recognition and accreditation of non-formal education and develop transitions to formal education, while enhancing its quality and grade level coordination.

4 Increased advocacy to stop attacks on schools and education facilities

Parties to the conflict should end attacks on schools and education facilities in accordance with International Humanitarian Law. Schools are a place of learning, a space for healing and health and a safe haven to foster normalcy and hope for a better future.

5 Prioritize Funding for Education in conflict hit countries

Funding and investment in education during emergencies remains significantly low. Of the funds requested education received less than 2% of total humanitarian funding³⁴.

More funding is required from governments and the private sector to provide resources to education during and in the aftermath of conflicts and emergencies in the region.

34 NRC and Save the Children (2015) Walk the Talk: Review of Donors' Humanitarian Policies on Education, June 2015



©UNICEF/ Noorani
12-year-old Safaa and her teacher during class in a Syrian refugee camp in the Kurdish region of Iraq. "All we can do is laugh and smile because this is our life," Safaa says. "It's sad but it's not going to stop me."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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©AFP PHOTO/MOHAMMED ABED
November 2014: Palestinian girls play inside their school which suffered heavy damage during seven weeks of conflict in Gaza last summer.