



World Vision

Building a better world for children

Examining the Syrian Humanitarian Crisis from the Ground: Part I

**Testimony before the
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

**Mr. Mark Smith
Senior Director, Humanitarian and Emergency Affairs
World Vision U.S.
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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch:

Thank you for inviting World Vision to testify about the humanitarian crisis in Syria, and for your work on behalf of vulnerable people around the world. Congressional oversight can help strengthen the efforts of the U.S. Government and the humanitarian community. This hearing offers a timely opportunity to examine how efforts address the needs and aspirations of Syrian families inside Syria and in host countries. Since World Vision focuses on specialized programming for children, today I will highlight the particular needs and vulnerabilities of children affected by the conflict in Syria.

World Vision is a Christian relief, development, and advocacy organization that serves millions of children and families in nearly 100 countries. I serve as the Senior Director of Humanitarian and Emergency Affairs for World Vision U.S. and have responded to humanitarian emergencies in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa for more than 15 years. Our 45,000 employees are dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice. This work includes emergency relief and preparedness for people impacted by natural disasters and armed conflict; long-term economic development; prevention and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children; mobilizing children, youth, and local communities to hold their governments accountable; and advocating for effective systems and laws that can provide a safety net and protection for vulnerable populations.

More than one million private donors, in every state and congressional district, support World Vision. We partner with over 10,000 U.S. churches, as well as corporations and foundations. We are part of the federation of World Vision International, which last year implemented more than \$2 billion in programming for children and communities. This included our response to 132 major disasters and humanitarian emergencies worldwide that reached nearly 11 million people impacted by these crises.

World Vision began its response to the Syria crisis in May 2011 from Lebanon, where we have worked since 1975, and now also operate in Syria, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. Most recently, World Vision began distributing humanitarian relief to stranded Syrians in Serbia. Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, World Vision has assisted more than two million people.

The magnitude of this historic crisis has overwhelmed the region with 16.2 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. Half of those are children. The ability of the region to continue accepting massive new waves of refugees is strained and at a breaking point. As resources become further depleted, refugees face immediate risks that particularly threaten the wellbeing of their children, and the future of an entire generation.

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Member Deutch, it pains me to see varying degrees of negative sentiment against Syrian refugees. Our response towards Syrians forced out of their country by conflict will define what we stand for as a nation. We can act out of fear towards Syrians who flee from war or we can show compassion towards those who seek refuge. I believe we are a country that continually shows compassion. The negative response, however, that I see from some Americans, especially about Syrian refugees who are migrating across the Balkans, varies quite dramatically from what my World Vision team tells me about the situation on the ground.

“Children. Dead. Sad, so sad,” cried a teacher from Syria who told us about her war-torn hometown. She and her husband decided to sell everything and take refuge in Europe with their two young daughters. Her six-year-old daughter, Noor, still looks up in alarm whenever she hears a helicopter or plane.

She expects them to drop a bomb.

“Everything got destroyed in Syria. War, horrible war,” recounted a former physics professor from Syria, who was fleeing through Serbia with his family.

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Member Deutch, the American people deserve to know these stories, to see these faces. They are filled with heartbreak, sadness, and loss. But, they flee for safety and hope of a better life—for themselves and for their children.

These stories touch something deep inside us that makes us think, “I can’t imagine if my children had to live like this. What decisions would I make if I walked in their shoes?”

IMPACT OF THE CRISIS ON SYRIAN CHILDREN

The war haunts an entire generation of Syria’s children. Every single child in Syria today, under the age of 5, only knows of life impacted by war. This crisis *is shaping an entire generation* of children—the threat of aerial attacks on their schools, markets, and hospitals *shapes them*; the loss of their fathers, mothers, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends *shapes them*; the threat of displacement from their homes *shapes them*; the reality of not having enough food for their families *shapes them*; and the reality of not having warm clothing and blankets to get them through the harsh winter months *shapes them*. Syria’s children are not being allowed to be what they are: children. They have been haunted by the brutal violence and the devastating consequences of this war. Ali, a 14-year-old Syrian refugee told World Vision, “I may die tomorrow, or the day after. I can’t dream of the future.” We must go beyond the facts and figures to the faces of children affected by this tragedy.

The face of the Syria crisis has become Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy who washed up on the shore of Turkey. The world saw his lifeless body—his red t-shirt, his tiny shoes, the front of his head and right cheek softly laying against the sand—and felt horror and shock. The Turkish officer who held Aylan in that now infamous photo said that Aylan reminded him of his own son. As he held Aylan, he recounted that he, “was experiencing feelings that only a father can feel when he hugs his child.” The officer continued, “While Aylan’s lifeless body was light as a feather, I, as a father, have never bore greater burden.”

The photo of little Aylan is a startling reminder of the tremendously difficult decisions refugees face when seeking safety for their families. Refugees face increasingly limited options for their future and these limited options often compromise their safety and even their dignity. Food rations have been cut time and again in refugee-hosting countries due to lack of funding. In Lebanon, \$13.50 must feed a refugee for an entire month. In Jordan, 229,000 Syrian refugees who live outside of camps were recently told they would no longer receive any food assistance whatsoever. And so they make decisions about whether or not to put their families in a dingy as they cross the Mediterranean; whether or not to ask their children to work to help support the family; whether or not they should agree to early marriages for their daughters because it’s one less mouth to feed; or whether or not to stay in Syria and risk their lives. 7.6 million, in fact, are still displaced within Syria.

Inside Syria, nearly four million children are internally displaced while some are caught in the line of fire where heavy fighting is taking place. An estimated 4.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance are in hard to reach and besieged areas.

Across the region, over two million Syrian children have crossed borders and now live as refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq. Indeed, the Syrian crisis is the largest refugee population from a single conflict in a generation. Over half of those displaced are children. Together, these children represent Syria's future and the chance to rebuild their nation, but they will only have the capacity to do this if we address their unique development. Quite alarmingly, the specific needs of Syrian children are largely not addressed within the humanitarian response.

I would like to go back to Ali, the 14-year-old Syrian refugee boy I earlier mentioned. Ali fled the war in Syria with his mother and two brothers. They now live in Lebanon. Ali was a top student at an informal World Vision school but, one day, he was not at his desk. We found out that Ali chose "bread over books" and took three jobs—at a library, exchange office, and charcoal shop—to help support his family. Ali told us that he finds time to read the books from library, returning them once he finishes reading. "I read so that I don't forget what I learned the last nine years of my life in Syria," he says. "I refuse to forget what I have learned over the years."

Those words still haunt me: "I read so that I don't forget...I refuse to forget."

In World Vision's office in Jordan, pictures drawn by Syrian refugee children line our hallways. The children's colored pictures are heartbreaking: they portray destruction of homes, bloodshed, and violence. One showed a child in the corner of the picture, silently witnessing the horror. The children affected by the crisis need mental health care and psychosocial support so they can process their traumatic experiences. Their childhood has been marked by displacement, destruction, and terror. While the U.S. government primarily directs funding to basic humanitarian assistance programs, such as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), much more emphasis is needed on critical psychosocial interventions, particularly for displaced and refugee Syrian children.

The crisis has a devastating impact on the education of millions of children and youth. Before the onset of the conflict in 2011, nearly every child in Syria was enrolled in school and literacy rates exceeded 90 percent. Today, inside Syria, 2.7 million children are no longer in school. Outside of Syria, over 50 percent or 750,000 school-age refugee children are out of school. Only 2.4 percent of Syrian children who work in Jordan attend school. The reasons for such high proportions of Syrian children being out of school include insufficient learning spaces and families lacking proper documentation to register their children, inability to pay the costs of education, cost of traveling to and from school, or having to rely on children to earn money for the family's survival.

While host governments are doing what they can to accommodate the increased demand for education, public schools in these countries are not able to provide for large numbers of refugee children. The lack of legal status, social isolation, and lack of support within the schools prevent students from entering or remaining in the education system. Rather than gaining an education, the crisis continues to push large numbers of Syrian children into the labor market.

Refugee children working to support their families are even more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Children are working in agriculture, markets, begging, and are engaged in domestic work. By forgoing

education in order to sustain their families, these children jeopardize their health and future employment opportunities.

WORLD VISION'S SYRIA RESPONSE

I would like to briefly touch on how psychosocial work has an impact on children's lives and urge the U.S. government to further integrate this important emphasis into their existing programming. World Vision's psychosocial support for children is interwoven into existing programming that cuts across education, child protection, and life skills training. This programming is vitally important for the wellbeing of children. Not addressing emotional impact and stress children have experienced over the course of the conflict could lead to a generation of children experiencing long-term mental, social, and economic problems. When a child's "toxic stress" response system is activated over a prolonged period of time, without the stabilizing presence of protective and caring relationships, elevated cortisol stress hormones in the brain impact that child. This chronic stress has long lasting impact on a child's learning abilities, memory, social interactions, stress and fear responses, and ability to control emotions—both in the short and long term.

World Vision places a large emphasis on psychosocial work through child-friendly spaces, where children engage in recreational activities that encourage self-expression through art, crafts, and storytelling. They facilitate their need to play and be in a less stressful environment with the care and attention of trained facilitators. For children, the power of play is critical for them to learn to cope with the horrors of their war experiences and to rebuild safe relationships with other adults and their peers. World Vision's research on child-friendly spaces found children who participated in such programs showed more consistent mental, social, and emotional wellbeing than refugee children who did not have such opportunities. Our research highlights how these spaces minimize long-term mental damage for children by helping them return to healthy routines and experience normalcy. To adults, opportunities to play may seem like a luxury, but for children, safety and opportunities to play is essential for their social, emotional, and mental wellbeing and, in turn, their ongoing development.

In our education programming, we train teachers to support stressed Syrian students who are unable to cope with their school curriculum and who may be exposed to bullying by peers. This additional support involves remedial classes with feedback sessions about the students' perspective of the courses and where they see themselves improving academically. We aim to reduce stress and prevent early school dropouts. Teachers and parents are also trained to identify various levels of emotional or behavioral distress in children, provide "psychological first aid" and, if necessary, refer children who may need more specialized mental health care.

In total, World Vision has assisted more than two million people affected by the Syria crisis. In this crisis, we prioritize food and food vouchers, clean water, toilets, winter clothing, blankets and other household items, health services, hygiene supplies, child protection, and educational support for children. We provide assistance to Syrian refugees, host communities, and vulnerable Syrians inside Syria. Funding for our programs comes from the U.S. Agency for International Development and other institutional donors.

In addition to our U.S. government funding, we are responding to the Syria humanitarian crisis with the World Vision Refugee Initiative. This is a long-term campaign to engage the Christian church and the American public, inspiring people to take action in these places of brokenness and human suffering. The response to this initiative has already been encouraging: within the month of September we raised more than \$2.6 million from 11,000 donors across the country. Hundreds of our donors have pledged to turn

their donation into a monthly recurring gift. In addition, Nielson recently conducted a recent poll on behalf of World Vision, surveying 2,000 U.S. adults: 83% believe the U.S. should in some way assist persons affected by the conflict in Syria.

When engaging with our supporters, World Vision receives extremely high responses from our Syria advocacy calls to action. Some of the highest levels of engagement from our supporters is on the Syria crisis. They want to see leadership from President Obama and Congress on the conflict in Syria.

President Obama and Congress now face a unique moment where their moral leadership will be tested. The urgency of the Syrian humanitarian crisis threatens the stability of the region. Syria is ground zero for a global proxy war where the primary casualties are innocent civilians in Syria.

Our response to the Syria crisis illustrates who we are as a people and what we stand for. The Syria regional crisis is the defining humanitarian crisis of our time. Although I have worked in the humanitarian field for over 15 years and witnessed humanitarian crises in Darfur, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan, have never before seen a crisis of this scale.

The staggering number of Syrian refugees in the Middle East and now Europe represent more than a humanitarian crisis. This is the moral disaster of our generation. Let us never forget the photos of Aylan washed up on the Turkish shore, or of desperate refugees begging to cross through Hungary and being treated as less than human, and of the striking images of death and destruction across Syria. Let us not forget that our humanitarian actions and programs for children, today, will also shape their future.

So, what can we do as a nation?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Civilian Protection:** Support a UN Security Council-mandated protection monitoring and reporting mechanism to track and publically expose indiscriminate attacks against civilians, including barrel bombs, mortars, and car bombs, and lay down clear consequences for violations.
 - Most civilians flee Syria because of the horrific bombardment of civilian areas, such as schools, hospitals, and markets. We need to address the reasons why civilians continue to flee Syria in a comprehensive approach to the refugee crisis. Moreover, civilian protection must be a primary objective in political negotiations for a settlement to the Syria crisis.
 - UNSC Resolutions 2139, 2165, and 2191, resolutions that prioritize the needs of civilians inside Syria, can no longer be ignored.
 - Tragically, these resolutions that call for increased access to humanitarian aid in Syria, end to attacks against civilians, and authorized UN aid operations into Syria from neighboring countries without requiring the consent of the Syrian government, have been ignored or undermined by the parties to the conflict, other UN member states, and even by members of the UNSC.
 - The UNSC has the legal authority to demand these changes, and its members have the political, diplomatic, and financial influence to enforce their commitments.
- **Political Solution:** Ensure the Syria crisis is a top diplomatic priority and engage with parties of the conflict to come to a comprehensive agreement for a peaceful solution.
 - There is a vacuum of U.S. leadership to politically and diplomatically prioritize an urgent and structured process towards a peaceful solution.

- The exodus of refugees from the Middle East is only a symptom of underlying disorders. Until the conflict is resolved, civilians will continue to flee Syria and it will not be safe to return home.
- If a political settlement is not attained in the near future, however, we then need to have a comprehensive plan to protect civilians so thousands and thousands are not killed and so children are protected from continuous exposure to violent conflict.
- **Livelihoods:** Invest in key economic sectors in host countries and incentivize livelihood programming to increase employment opportunities for refugees and impacted host communities.
 - Daily survival is becoming increasingly challenging for the four million refugees who flee to countries bordering Syria. If we are to address the migration crisis across the Mediterranean, we must look to the challenges that Syrians face as they struggle to protect their families and identify livelihood opportunities.
 - The U.S. should encourage refugee-hosting governments to develop administrative procedures that allow refugees to obtain and retain residency and civil documentation.
 - Host governments should facilitate refugees' access to basic livelihoods without being penalized and reduce barriers to work in sectors where there is demand in the labor market.
 - When refugees have limited legal status to work, they are in danger to exploitative wages and other forms of abuse, and risk being sent back to Syria.
 - Consequently, wages are driven down and vulnerable host communities who rely on low-skilled employment are affected. This can increase child labor and contribute to social tensions between refugee and host communities.
 - Refugee-hosting countries in the region and government donors need to ensure there is support for the most vulnerable and prioritize livelihood programming to boost employment opportunities for refugees and host communities.
- **Education and Psychosocial Support:** Prioritize programming for child protection, psychosocial support, and increased capacity of schools serving Syrian children in Syria and in host countries.
 - Children's programs for child protection, education, and psychosocial support remain some of the most under-funded areas of the response.
 - The U.S. could support refugee households to cover schools costs and increase informal and non-formal certified education opportunities in host communities through community based programs.
 - In addition, education could be better integrated with livelihood programming, such as vocational training.
- **Humanitarian Response Funding:** Collectively address the funding shortfall for the UN appeal for the Syria humanitarian crisis.
 - Needs outpace resources across every sector and in every country impacted by this large-scale protracted crisis. The 2015 UN appeal has only received less than half of the required funding.
 - Support robust humanitarian funding through the regular appropriations process and through a Syria/Iraq humanitarian relief emergency supplemental for FY2016. The urgent need with the Syria crisis deserves full funding. We must step up our collective action to address the needs of these children or we risk losing an entire generation.

I would like to thank the Subcommittee for your work on the Syrian humanitarian crisis—a tragedy that will impact an entire generation of Syria's children. It is an honor to testify before you today and I look forward to answering your questions.