

# SHATTERED LIVES

Protecting civilians  
in war-torn Syria —  
a shared responsibility

**CONCERN**  
worldwide

## **Concern's work in response to the Syria Crisis:**

With support from key donors including Irish Aid, USAID, DFID, ECHO and others including generous donations from the public, Concern has been responding to the crisis in Syria for over four years, working with victims of the conflict in Turkey, Lebanon and within Syria itself.

Concern's work in Syria focuses on emergency response and support for internally displaced people in the north of the country through the provision of: water and sanitation services, including the distribution of hygiene kits; shelter; and the distribution of food baskets and vouchers to allow people to purchase food in local markets.

Concern is locally well recognised as an effective and well-prepared emergency responder, continuing to bring critical life-saving and life-sustaining food and household items to people fleeing from conflict and in their places of refuge.

Additionally, Concern is providing protection and vocational training support to vulnerable women and children who are suffering the psycho-social and economic hardships of the conflict, including the programme 'Engaging men and boys to reduce domestic violence'.

In 2016, Concern had at least 390,000 direct beneficiaries in Syria across all sectors. The total population reached by Concern's response to the Syria crisis through programmes in Syria, Turkey and Lebanon in 2016 was 650,000 people.

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## FOREWORD

It is a truly sobering fact that we are now marking six years since the beginning of the Syrian war. Though the conflict has its roots in the Arab Spring, the ongoing volatility seen in the region at this moment could scarcely be further from the widespread optimism of that time. In Syria, what began as a peaceful protest in a provincial town in 2011 has led to one of the most fierce and protracted conflicts in modern history.

It is a war that has been characterised by extreme violence, with estimates of over 400,000 people dead, incidents of torture and appalling barbarity, and a shockingly widespread disregard for International Humanitarian Law and civilian life. Over the last six years, the fighting in Syria has also descended into proxy war, a multi-layered ethnic and regional conflict intensified by a broad spectrum of international actors and armed groups vying for regional influence or ideological dominance. The resulting turmoil has ripped the country apart, with seismic implications for all areas of the country's society and economy, but it has had the most profound effect on the ordinary Syrian people. Countless hospitals and schools have been destroyed or damaged, doctors and medical staff have been killed or have fled, disease has spread and life expectancy has plummeted.

### The crisis

The Syrian crisis has become the defining humanitarian challenge of our time. As the conflict has enveloped almost all major urban areas of the country over the last six years, more than half of Syria's population have been forced to flee their homes. The scale of the exodus out of the country has been breath-taking, with almost five million people driven beyond Syrian borders to claim refugee status abroad, predominantly in surrounding nations such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In an ominous sign of the combined effect of a damaged power system and a population driven into exile, the country is now 83% darker at night than it was in 2011.

The arrival of Syrians on the shores of Europe and elsewhere has been met with varying degrees of welcome and resistance. In far too many cases, refugees have faced hostility and reactionary political discord, but their arrival has also led to a heartening reception amongst much of broader society, awakening the humanitarian spirit of ordinary citizens across the globe.

Played out daily on global news channels, the crisis has stirred the collective consciousness of the world like no other issue. However, while the focus of the world's attention is often on the small percentage of Syrian refugees who have made the journey to Europe, it is less so on the millions in the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, or those displaced within the Syrian borders where the greatest needs and abuses exist. Despite the panic surrounding levels of migration into Europe, **14 in every 15 of Syria's displaced people are still in the region, and most of the displaced are still inside Syria.**

### Internally displaced people

Out of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million, more than half have been displaced, with almost five million people forced to flee as refugees to neighbouring countries. **The majority of Syrians who have been uprooted by the war remain within Syria** and this is where needs are undoubtedly greatest. An estimated 6.3 million people are currently displaced throughout the country, and a total of 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Almost a million of these people are trapped in besieged areas across 16 different locations in the country, while a further three million people live in areas that are hard to reach for humanitarian organisations. It is often the most vulnerable and least mobile—children, the elderly, the disabled and the poorest—who cannot manage to flee the country and they face the biggest disruptions to their lives.

### Access—a continuous barrier to humanitarian assistance

The scale of need is immense, and delivery of assistance inside Syria is massively complicated by the intensity and constantly shifting nature of the conflict. The widespread use of heavy weaponry in civilian populated areas, the shifting lines of territorial control, denial of humanitarian access, attacks on humanitarian aid convoys and the use of deliberate siege and starvation military tactics, have had a severe impact on accessing civilians. Delivering the most basic of needs, food, shelter, and medicine, is uncertain, sporadic and in many cases impossible. Providing a humanitarian response to the plethora of protection issues that exist is hugely challenging.

### Focusing on ordinary civilians—Concern's experience

This report reflects the experience of ordinary Syrians and demonstrates how violence now permeates every aspect of life in Syria. From the continual threat of bombing and other conflict related violence, to the exposure of displaced people to violence in unprotected settings, to increased levels of domestic violence in a strained and traumatised environment, the exposure to protection threats is widespread across all sections of society. Protection programmes, though vastly underfunded, are an essential component in the struggle to minimise the incidence of violence and the exposure to risk across the community.

Concern's experience since 2013 in implementing ambitious protection programmes for displaced people in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, including the Irish Aid-funded 'Engaging men to reduce domestic violence' programme, has shown how effective protection programming can be when sustained access and necessary resources are available.

Concern's team inside Syria is working with people directly affected by the conflict. These are people who, before the war, were tailors, shopkeepers, lawyers and housekeepers. They were children who played happily without the constant threat of bombs or missiles, child labour or recruitment into the war. In this report Syrians, through case studies and focus group discussions, give personal accounts of how this devastating six year conflict has shattered their lives and destroyed families.

**“An estimated 6.3 million people are currently displaced throughout the country and a total of 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.”**

Displaced to a small village outside of the city lines, the children gather on the carpet in their temporary shelter to eat breakfast. The winter has been brutal and the lack of insulation and heat in the dilapidated shelter makes for chilly mornings.



### **Violence is everywhere**

What is striking, though hardly surprising, in their accounts, is that violence is not confined to the bombing, missile attacks and wanton destruction of Aleppo, Raqqa and other cities that we witness through international news reports, but that it has seeped into every aspect of Syrian life, so that Syrian people do not feel safe or secure in any environment, not even in their own homes. The story of Fatima<sup>1</sup>, for example, who lost her husband to the conflict, captures the resilience of the Syrian people who, in spite of everything they are going through, display endless fortitude and live with the hope that someday their lives that have been shattered will return to what is now completely alien: normality.

### **Challenging the inevitability of violence**

Through the stories and discussions contained in this report, we see clearly how concerns about the everyday incidence of violence are at the forefront of people's minds. Yet we also see proactive discussion about how to mitigate this violence: practical solutions suggested and appeals for services that would have a much needed impact. Though violence may be pervasive, there is no acceptance of its inevitability. Even after all that they have been through, there is hope.

After six years of conflict, this hope must inspire us to do more. Challenging the inevitability of violence must be central to not only protection and humanitarian strategies but, more importantly, to diplomatic and political efforts to resolve the crisis in 2017.

Even when protection programmes are most effective, they cannot provide a substitute to peace. For as long as the

conflict rages, the people of Syria will suffer, there will be further mass displacement, and humanitarian actors will continue to struggle to reach the most desperate in need, able only to provide a sticking plaster on an ever growing and deepening wound.

We cannot resign ourselves to seeing a year like 2016 happen again, to seeing the devastating images of Aleppo replicated across other cities in Syria like Raqqa or Deir ez-Zor. That is what will happen unless the inevitability of the conflict is challenged, and the inertia and politicised decision making amongst the international community is not reversed. Though recent political developments around the world may be ominous for humanitarians, Concern welcomes the election of António Guterres as the new United Nations Secretary General, and is encouraged by his vision for revitalising the conflict resolution objectives of the UN with a 'surge of diplomacy'.

Steadfast diplomacy is needed at this moment more than ever. Right now it may seem like the prospect of an end to the bloodshed in Syria is impossible, but the recent disarmament process in Colombia and, closer to home, the peace process in Northern Ireland, has shown us that solutions can be found in even the most seemingly intractable of conflicts. It is never naïve to set our sights on the horizon of peace, no matter how distant that peace may appear.

If those who are displaced have not given up hope, we have no right to either.

**Dominic MacSorley**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Concern Worldwide

<sup>1</sup> A core principle of Concern's work in Syria is the protection of the identities of our beneficiaries. The names of those documented in this report have been changed to ensure their anonymity. To illustrate the stories of the people with whom we work, while retaining their anonymity, we asked illustrator, Marc Corrigan, to provide a visual aspect of their experience.

**“THE SYRIAN  
CRISIS HAS  
BECOME THE  
DEFINING  
HUMANITARIAN  
CHALLENGE OF  
OUR TIME.”**



## THE ORPHANED CHILD

**“I take care  
of my brothers  
and sister”**

Layal is 11 years old and in fourth class. She has two brothers and a sister. When our team met her in northern Syria, they described her as seeming “shattered” and “frightened”, traumatised by having witnessed the death of her parents in front of her young eyes. Although she is supported by relatives, she has assumed responsibility for her younger siblings. “I take care of my brothers and sister and I want them to be educated”, the sombre child told us. “I will do everything they ask and I will not leave them.” When asked about her own future, she looked confused and despondent. She paused before answering: “It’s so far away, the future. I mean, now I am 11 years old and I don’t know what I will do when I am 12 years old.”



## THE DISPLACED YOUTH

**“We were orphans  
living with our  
grandparents.”**

Twenty-year-old Marwan lives in a displaced people's camp in northern Syria. His demeanour is depressed, hopeless, lonely—a young man separated from his family and struggling to make his way against the turmoil and obstacles of war. Two and a half years ago, his city was attacked and his father disappeared—he and his two brothers have heard nothing since. “We looked for him everywhere,” he recalls, “but we couldn't find him. He still hasn't been found. It's been two and a half years. The road to our home city is still closed so we don't know whether he is alive or dead.”

After their father disappeared, he and his brothers lived for a time with their grandparents. Life has been hard: “We were orphans living with our grandparents. We have experienced a lot of injustices since the start of the war. There was no food and we were often cold.”

Now, the family is separated. Marwan's brothers are in Turkey, while he lives alone in a single tent in a displaced person's camp. Finding work and making money are a constant struggle: “We are now in the winter season and I don't have a job. Every day, I go to the city to look for a job but I haven't found anything yet.”

# WHAT IS HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION PROGRAMMING?

**“...(the Security Council) recalls that deliberately targeting civilians and other protected persons as such in situations of armed conflict is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law, reiterates its condemnation in the strongest terms of such practices, and demands that all parties immediately put an end to such practices.”<sup>2</sup>**

–United Nations Security Council Resolution 1674

2 United Nations Security Council (2006) Resolution 1674 [on protection of civilians in armed conflict].

Humanitarian protection is about improving the safety, well-being and dignity of crisis-affected populations. It is born out of a recognition that the provision of essential services in humanitarian response is insufficient unless the safety and dignity of affected populations is also assured. This reflects a holistic approach to humanitarian action that emphasises the retention of disaster affected people’s **humanity as well as their lives**.

As such, protection interventions are most effective when carried out alongside other humanitarian activities and when there is **consistent access** to targeted populations.

As the scope of protection threats in emergencies is broad, the spectrum of protection programming models must be similarly extensive. A key facet of this is identifying sections of society that are **most vulnerable**, and designing and implementing programmes that seek to reduce threats to their protection needs. Examples of such programmes include, but are not limited to, those that address:

- Sexual and gender based violence in emergencies
- Child protection issues, including preventing child labour and addressing the needs of separated or unaccompanied children
- Addressing the needs of people with disabilities, the elderly, or those with compromised mobility

## **‘Right to Protection’ versus Humanitarian Protection Programming**

This report is concerned with humanitarian protection programming in the context of Syria. The term **‘right to protection’** relates to civilians’ right to be protected from the direct impacts of conflict. This is mainly an issue for the duty bearing stakeholders such as governments, peacekeeping forces, armed forces, and militia. In many of the conflict contexts in which Concern works however, it is the legally designated duty bearers who are responsible for the violations of civilian populations’ rights.

## **‘Protection of Civilians’ and ‘Humanitarian Protection Programming’**

as discussed in this report relate chiefly to the secondary impacts of conflict on populations that have been exposed to a cycle of organised violence. The impact of this exposure can affect the everyday behaviour of individuals and may contribute to further all-pervasive violence in homes, at work, in schools and in the street, as demonstrated in Concern’s focus group discussions with beneficiaries. Psychosocial programmes can help significantly to break these cycles of violence.

Protection needs in Syria differ in severity and type depending on the context. In areas of continuing active conflict, the immediate threat of death and injury from violence is devastatingly acute. Though the number of casualties in the



These two little boys survived a landmine explosion after they and their family fled the fighting in their home city. Tragically, their brother died in the explosion and their sister lost an eye as they ran for their lives. Their father was also injured in the blast but managed to escape with his remaining children. After travelling a long distance, they are now living in this camp in northern Syria. They received emergency food rations and a hygiene kit from Concern soon after their arrival.

Syrian war is contested, the estimated number of people who have died as a result of the conflict is in excess of 400,000.<sup>3</sup> The conflict has been characterised by a high level of warfare in urban and civilian populated areas. Tens of thousands of civilians have died as a result of being caught up in mass shootings and aerial, mortar and ground artillery attacks.<sup>4</sup>

In the last two years, as international involvement in the conflict has increased, the scale of fighting has intensified and the impact of this on civilians has been catastrophic. Access to civilian populations in need and negotiating safe humanitarian space have become more difficult as siege and starvation tactics have become the norm, which is in open violation of International Humanitarian Law. Communities are being systematically deprived of access to support essential for their survival as a tactic to force surrender, and this is as grave a protection threat as death from direct violence.

As Aleppo became the most central theatre of conflict in 2016, the situation on the ground came to resemble an apocalyptic sight. The bombing of an aid convoy on the outskirts of the city in September shocked the world and the siege of Aleppo that took place towards the end of the year was perhaps the most ferocious chapter of the war so far, with a UN humanitarian chief commenting that it had become the apex of a growing catalogue of horrors:

*“There are no limits or red lines left to cross. The rules of war—sacrosanct notions borne out of generations of costly and painful lessons and set more than 150 years ago in the First Geneva Convention—have been systematically disregarded in Syria.”<sup>5</sup>*

Aleppo is symbolic and notable for many things—the size of its population, the intensity of the city’s bombardment, its historical significance and the resilience of its people—but the siege was far from unique. Today, almost a million people are under siege or in militarily encircled areas across 16 different areas of Syria.<sup>6</sup> Their needs are immediate for survival, and access for humanitarian organisations must not continue to be contested politically and militarily, as it has been so far, with such tragic consequences. Though the reach and scale of protection programming has increased recently, and there have been some notable improvements in access to besieged areas in the last year, significant military and bureaucratic impediments remain.<sup>7</sup> Failure to protect civilians from direct violence and the systematic deprivation of essential resources had a devastating impact in 2016 while the world looked on, and it remains the gravest concern in Syria in 2017.

3 United Nations Radio (2016) Syria envoy claims 400,000 have died in Syria conflict. Available at: <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2016/04/syria-envoy-claims-400000-have-died-in-syria-conflict/#.WLCYW2-LSM8>

4 New York Times (2015) Death in Syria. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/14/world/middleeast/syria-war-deaths.html>

5 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) UN Humanitarian Chief, Stephen O'Brien Statement to the Security Council on Syria 30/11/16. Available at: <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/syria-there-are-no-limits-or-red-lines-left-cross-un-humanitarian-chief>

6 UNOCHA (2016) 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview-Syrian Arab Republic p 10

7 UNOCHA (2016) 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview-Syrian Arab Republic p 23

## Addressing the Protection Needs

The protection needs of those who have fled the areas of war and are displaced within Syria are complex. They vary across regions and demographics, but almost every Syrian is now affected in some way:

- **Gender based violence (GBV)**, domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual violence, has increased across the country, with many women reporting that their husbands are quicker to resort to violence, as the external conflict takes an increasing psychosocial toll within the home.<sup>8</sup> The conflict has led to a vast amount of single female-headed households without a primary breadwinner.
- **Negative coping mechanisms** have increased as a result of depleted resources and eroded social cohesion. Women and children are disproportionately affected by this with rising levels of girls' early marriage, child labour and youth recruitment into armed groups.
- **Men** also face greater risk of arrest, detention, harassment from the security services, recruitment into armed groups, disappearance and death.
- **The elderly and those with disabilities**, particularly those with limited family support, have a wide range of unmet needs in displacement situations with sporadic service delivery.
- All groups uprooted by the conflict face limitations on their movement, particularly those **without access to documentation, especially identity documents.**<sup>9</sup>

Though the challenges far outweigh the capacity of humanitarian actors in Syria, protection programming has grown more robust across many areas of the country in the last two years.<sup>10</sup> As most protection issues are linked to the conflict, programme services are designed to offer **complementary supports** that address some of the effects of the conflict in sectors such as:

- Economic and direct financial support
- Psychosocial and counselling services
- Skills and livelihoods training
- Education services for children
- Services to respond to and mitigate GBV including women's centres, and facilities to provide clinical management of sexual assault

In 2016, for example, the majority of protection funding spent by the UN and NGOs, was directed towards child protection interventions or mitigating protection risks, reducing vulnerabilities, and enhancing protection. A significant portion of the allocated funding also provided services to survivors of gender-based violence and mitigating the future risk of GBV, psychosocial support, and the provision of protection from violence to vulnerable children and families.<sup>11</sup>

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- 8 Global Protection Cluster (2016) 'Voice' Assessment findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017. P 9
- 9 United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Protecting and Supporting the Displaced in Syria UNHCR Syria End of Year Report 2015 P 17
- 10 Global Protection Cluster (2016) 'Voice' Assessment findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017. P 8
- 11 Financial Tracking Service: Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2016-Expenditure. Available at: [https://fts.unocha](https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/501flows?order=directionalproperty_1&sort=asc&f%5b0%5ddestinationClusterIdName%3A%223192%3AProtection%22)

## Barriers to Protection Programming

### \$180 Million Protection Funding Shortfall in 2016

Despite the increasing recognition that protection is a central pillar of humanitarian response, and the consistent support of key donors such as Irish Aid, protection remains drastically underfunded. In 2016, the greatest number of people in need was in the protection sector, yet protection was one of the

least funded sectors. Of the \$236 million required for protection in the UN's Humanitarian Needs Overview, only 24%, or \$56.5 million, was received, leaving a shortfall of \$180 million.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in 2015, the protection sector was only 24.3% funded.<sup>13</sup>

### Humanitarian Access to Civilians

In addition to funding, access, security and technical and partner capacity also present significant obstacles to increasing the scale and diversifying the range of protection services across Syria.<sup>14</sup> Protection programmes can be relatively low cost, but they require sustained access to communities and a certain level of technical capacity and knowledge to be effectively implemented. Limited and one-off access to areas facing high severity of need as well as increases in the scale, severity and complexity of the crisis, force humanitarian organisations to prioritise immediate, life-saving interventions over preventive actions. Even since the announced cessation of hostilities at the end of 2016, there has not been an improvement in access. Medical facilities and humanitarian workers continue to be attacked, and a great deal of relief supplies are offloaded before delivery to those in need.<sup>15</sup> The six-year conflict in Syria has been characterised by a lack of safe, unimpeded, and sustained access for humanitarians, and conflict remains the greatest obstacle to reaching people in need.

The case studies that feature in this report are of the people with whom Concern and our partners work in northern Syria, an area that has experienced a high level of displacement in part due to the proximity to a number of densely populated urban areas. Their stories are authentic and their experience reflects a nationwide reality.

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- 12 Financial Tracking Service: Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2016: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/501/summary> Accessed 20 February 2017
- 13 Financial Tracking Service: Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2015: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/461/summary>
- 14 UNOCHA (2016) Syria Humanitarian Response Plan mid-year report 2016 P 26.
- 15 United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) Transcript of press stakeout by Mr. Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the UN Special Envoy on Syria, after Humanitarian Access Task Force Meeting 16 February 2017. Available at: [http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/\(httpNewsByYear\\_en\)/FA51032E05CA8D67C12580CA002A6CF7?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(httpNewsByYear_en)/FA51032E05CA8D67C12580CA002A6CF7?OpenDocument)



# \$180 Million

## Protection Funding Shortfall in 2016

Displaced families and host community wait in line to enter a Concern vetted market to redeem food vouchers.



## THE WIDOWED MOTHER

“When my husband was working, he could provide for our needs. But now, who can help me?”

Fatima’s husband—and all of his family—were killed in a massacre in their city a year and a half ago.

“We woke up to the sound of bullets and very loud crashing noises,” —she recalls the events leading to her husband’s death.

“My husband wanted to know what was happening—someone told him that his uncle had been killed—so he went outside onto the street. My children started grabbing onto me from fear and started crying. I went to look for him, and after a while I found him dead with his family members.”

The family have been left traumatised by the death of their husband and father: “Since my husband was killed, my children don’t want to speak because they miss their father so much.”

Being a widow in a war-zone is not easy. Fatima has a daily struggle to provide for her four children: “When my husband was working, he could provide for our needs. But now, who can help me?” she told us. “I have four kids. They can’t work. There are a lot of things they need but I can’t provide for them. I depend on people’s help—and on assistance provided by organisations. It’s hard but I accept the help for the sake of my children. I have three daughters and a boy asking for things I can’t buy for them. I am afraid the aid will be cut off.”



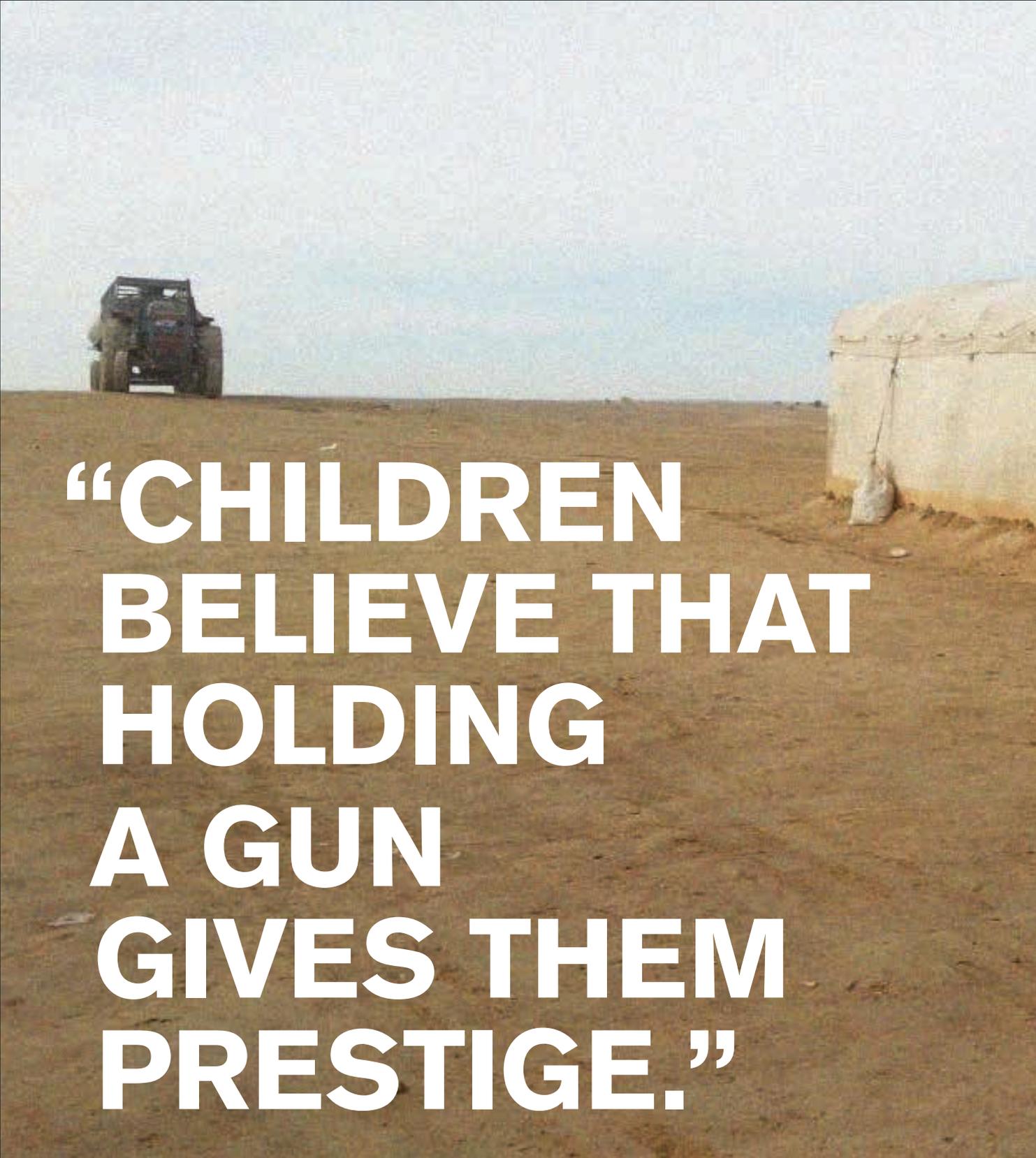
## THE FISHERMAN'S FAMILY

Fadil is a 36-year-old fisherman with eleven dependents—his wife, six young children, his two parents, and two younger brothers. Late last year, fear of recruitment left Fadil's movement very restricted: "I became afraid to walk to the market," he explains. "I didn't know what would happen. At any moment, someone could have grabbed me and held me in confinement for any silly reason or forced me to take up arms." This meant he could no longer fish. And with the cost of food and other essentials increasing, and bombardments becoming more frequent, the family made the difficult decision to leave.

The journey to the new city was long and arduous—and much of it on foot—but they found help when they arrived. "When we first arrived in the new city, Concern provided food baskets for us and also registered us to receive food vouchers. We were so thankful."

But life is still difficult and riven with fear. "My brothers are afraid of recruitment still as they are of the right age," he tells us. "They don't go to the market, fearful of people and their agenda. I worry that fishing will not be enough to provide for my family. The market is not very good at the moment and I don't think we can cover all of our needs. Still, I am trying. And pray to God that this hateful war will end soon so that I can return to my city again—where I know my neighbours."

**"They don't go to the market, fearful of people and their agenda."**

A photograph of a desert landscape. In the distance, a dark-colored vehicle is parked on a flat, sandy plain. To the right, a portion of a light-colored, cylindrical tent is visible. The sky is a pale, clear blue. The overall scene is arid and open.

**“CHILDREN  
BELIEVE THAT  
HOLDING  
A GUN  
GIVES THEM  
PRESTIGE.”**



# PROTECTION RISKS IN NORTHERN SYRIA

## RESULTS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH LOCAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS

**Using information obtained from discussions and conversations with Syrians displaced by the conflict, this report seeks to document the protection challenges in two districts of northern Syria where Concern operates. The statements and recommendations mentioned in these discussions reflect the opinions expressed by participants and are not necessarily endorsed by Concern.**

### Methodology

After almost six years of conflict in Syria, significant challenges remain in obtaining information from formal sources for humanitarian needs in many regions. Across much of the country, including parts of northern Syria, the frontlines of battle and control can shift frequently and rapidly. This can have severe implications for access and presents considerable challenges with regards to carrying out systematic information collection. This report is intended as a qualitative approach to protection in two areas with a large population of internally

displaced persons (IDPs), a snapshot of the everyday concerns and issues facing the most vulnerable groups in these areas.

This report is based on the information gathered from segregated groups of girls, boys, women and men from northern Syria. The purpose of meeting with local community members was to understand what their protection concerns are. The focus group discussions aimed to capture information related to protection concerns of the respondents, particularly women and children as the most vulnerable groups so that Concern could respond with appropriate support.

During each discussion, two facilitators were present: male facilitators with the men and boys, and female facilitators with the women and girls. All facilitators came from the local community. Eight discussions were held, providing an opportunity for 65 individuals to express their main protection concerns and propose initiatives that could be taken to mitigate the risks.

Reflecting the need to provide a comprehensive insight into the protection concerns of all of the population, particularly the most vulnerable groups, approximately 52% of participants were female, and 50% of the participants were under 18 years old. An average of eight individuals attended each discussion. Six thematic topics were discussed with guiding questions provided under each.



The water truck is providing clean water for displaced families by regularly filling the large white tank. Displaced families congregate to take clean water from the tanker.

## Violence is All-Pervasive

**“AS A TAILOR I NEED TO FREQUENTLY GO OUT TO THE MARKET, BUT I’M AFRAID OF BOMBINGS AND HARASSMENT.”**

—Discussions with women

During each group discussion, girls, boys, women and men were asked about their main protection concerns, what type of violence affects the community, and whether certain groups are believed to face a higher level of risk.

One of the main findings of the focus group discussions was that **violence occurs everywhere**: in schools, at work, at home and in public spaces like markets and on the streets.

Discussions among all groups indicated that acute violent incidents directly related to the war—including car bombings, attacks in crowded places and during special events, such as weddings—are among the main protection concerns. These are compounded by other related concerns including the existence of landmines and unexploded shells in surrounding areas, the spread of diseases, and a lack of medicines and medical staff.

The participants identified a number of factors that increase the risk of violence, including:

- Being in crowded places
- Attending communal or special events
- The presence of security authorities or armed groups

In addition to these points, the lack of education and knowledge of children’s and women’s rights in relation to their own protection was identified as a barrier to addressing protection concerns.

Though violence directly related to the conflict was the greatest concern in the discussions, it was consistently noted that there is **an overall upsurge in broader societal violence**, said to be driven by psychological and other traumatic effects of the conflict on civilians, which deeply affects their roles in different everyday domains such as in school and at home.

For example, participants in the focus group discussions unanimously agreed that it is common for teachers to practice physical violence or to verbally insult students. Girls and boys noted that violence is often understood as a method to educate children. Students also suffer **discrimination based on ethnicity and gender** by their teachers or other students. At home, many women and children are victims of **domestic violence**. The participants noted that many parents now behave more strictly with their children, sending their sons to work or **demanding a more submissive attitude from their daughters while giving preferential treatment to the boys**. At work, employers also resort to violence against their employees, particularly against children. Participants also expressed protection concerns regarding the local authorities and armed groups. The participants also fear other immediate consequences of war and siege, such as a lack of food and the absence of education opportunities for children.

**“I AM NOT AFRAID OF DYING, I FEAR DISABILITY”**

—Discussion with boys

This violence has an impact on all sections of society but some sections have been disproportionately affected. Women and children in particular are continuing to suffer some of the worst effects of the upsurge in violence and protection concerns amongst these groups are especially pronounced.

## **MAIN PROTECTION CONCERNS REPORTED BY PARTICIPANTS**

- Car bombings and explosions in crowded places
  - Forced conscription
  - Harassment and abuse
  - Forced displacement and travel restrictions
  - Spread of diseases
  - Lack of medicines and medical staff
-

## Women and Children are Most Vulnerable

All participants agreed that **women and children are the groups most at risk**. Young participants (those aged between 14 and 18) indicated that girls are **particularly vulnerable to abuse, harassment and forced marriage**. Young men and boys are facing forced conscription and **recruitment by armed groups** and as a result many families are sending their sons out of the country alone to protect them from recruitment. Concern staff who have spent time in northern Syria remarked that there are few 18 to 35 year old men left in the rural villages and towns in this area as they have been recruited into the war, fled the country or died in the conflict. This leaves many households without the main breadwinner, leaving vulnerable women to eke out a living. Poverty has also forced many vulnerable children to turn to hazardous work such as selling fuel.

## Sexual and Gender Based Violence

**“I SAW TWO YOUNG MEN ON A MOTORCYCLE WHO WERE HARASSING A GIRL. WHEN SHE RESPONDED ANGRILY, THEY STARTED TO HIT HER EVEN HARDER. I WISH I COULD DO SOMETHING.”**

—Discussion with women

Respondents mentioned that a high number of women and girls are victims of **domestic violence, sexual abuse and other forms of gender-based violence often perpetrated by their husbands and relatives**. The participants explained that the increase in cases of domestic violence is a result of the psychological impact that war is having on the behaviour and roles of family members.

In the groups of women, girls and boys, it was noted that some men express their anger and their feeling of powerlessness by resorting to physical violence or insults against other family members, particularly their wives and daughters.

Participants in all of the focus group discussions agreed that women and children, particularly girls, are most at risk of suffering sexual violence. **Women and girls indicated that they are particularly worried about harassment outside of their homes**, on the way to the market or school. As argued by female and young participants, girls additionally face **the risk of forced marriage**. The victims of sexual abuse and harassment often remain silent, fearing **stigma or rejection from their family or in the community**.

**“GIRLS ARE SUBJECT TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PERPETRATED BY THEIR BROTHERS (WHO IN TURN) RECEIVE PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT FROM THEIR PARENTS.”**

—Discussion with women

According to the women's group, **the feeling of vulnerability is worse in camps** as there are many people from diverse places being hosted in the same camp and there is a general sentiment of mistrust. The women's group added that **perpetrators can hide behind this anonymity**.

Women and young people said that they believe **education was key in preventing domestic and sexual violence**.

**“WOMEN ARE IN MANY CASES MORE VULNERABLE. I WAS WALKING DOWN THE STREET WHILE A GUY RIDING A MOTORCYCLE SLAPPED ME ON THE CHEST. I COULDN'T TELL ANYONE ABOUT THIS SITUATION AND I JUST REMAINED SILENT FOR FEAR OF SCANDAL.”**

—Discussion with women

## Protecting Children

### Child labour

**“I KNOW A SEVEN YEAR OLD CHILD WHO IS LUBRICATING AND GREASING CARS, A JOB THAT IS TOO TIRING FOR A CHILD OF THAT AGE AND I CANNOT DO ANYTHING TO HELP HIM.”**

—Discussion with men

Due to the precarious situation of many families, more children have dropped out of school to work and contribute to the household economy. Boys often work in machinery or industry sectors, as street vendors, waste collectors, carpenters, blacksmiths, or in construction. In rural areas children are more involved in agriculture or livestock activities. Many girls work as seamstresses or perform activities traditionally considered degrading like cleaning carpets or being a house servant. **Children perform hazardous activities** in the steel or fuel industry, putting them at a higher risk of developing respiratory diseases and other illnesses. Many participants discussed the issue of children selling fuel, and the safety risks involved with selling fuel. Children collecting waste are more exposed to landmines and unexploded ordnance.

The participants proposed some **solutions to prevent children from working and to support those who are currently doing so**, including providing children and their families with basic financial support, raising awareness among parents about the negative consequences of child labour, and providing vocational training to children. All participants stressed the importance of receiving **education** but particularly to establish a project to **support skills development and professional** training of minors to secure their future. Adults noted that children, particularly orphans, are also in need of **psychological support**.

### Recommendations from focus group participants on preventing child labour

- Establish more safe educational centres
- Improve the quality of education
- Provide conditional financial support for education
- Provide recreational spaces for children
- Create more employment opportunities for adults
- Provide psychosocial support to children
- Provide basic housing and services for orphans
- Establish social mobilisation campaigns to encourage families to send their children to school or to benefit from alternative learning opportunities
- Deliver essential educational supplies

### Unaccompanied and Separated Children

There is a **high number of unaccompanied and separated children as a result of the conflict**, and insufficient mechanisms for their care. The community is aware of the vulnerable situation of unaccompanied and separated minors and in most cases other relatives, neighbours or other community members care for and protect them. Many children are separated from their families in situations of tension and in large crowds, particularly when fleeing to border countries. Some families, unable to meet the basic needs of their children, leave them with other relatives or acquaintances in Syria to give them a better life.

These separated or unaccompanied children need **psychosocial support**, particularly children who have lost their parents in the violence. The discussion groups all suggested that the best way to help orphaned and separated children would be through the provision of education and vocational training to ensure that children can work and take care of themselves as adults. **Raising awareness** among parents is key to preventing them from sending their children alone to other countries to seek refuge and to avoid participating in child labour to contribute to the household income.

### Participation of Children in Conflict

#### “CHILDREN BELIEVE THAT HOLDING A GUN GIVES THEM PRESTIGE.”

—Discussion with boys

Young Syrians are often unaware of the risks and causes of conflict and can find themselves directly involved in the fighting for a number of reasons. In some cases, youth voluntarily join armed groups to defend a cause they believe in, while others join armed groups in search of a sense of community and belonging, for example after losing their loved ones in the war. Some families may convince their children to join armed groups to protect their families and property, while others send

their children out of the country to prevent them from being recruited by armed groups.

Children often become involved in the conflict due to poverty and can also be attracted by the possibility of driving cars, wearing uniform or using weapons. Syrian children are also indirectly involved in the production or dismantlement of military arms and explosives, as well as working for political parties as informants or distributors of food and other materials.

The focus group participants suggested that social media networks and TV were useful tools to raise awareness among children of the tragic consequences of getting involved in conflict. Furthermore, women suggested that broadcasting more entertainment programmes on TV, and **providing more recreational support** could help to divert young people from taking up arms. By providing meeting and recreational places and facilitating recreational and **education activities**, children could also be discouraged from taking part in conflict.

### Recommendations by focus group participants on preventing participation of children in conflict

- Establish more and safer educational centres
- Run awareness campaigns through TV and social media
- Improve the quality and access to education
- Provide recreational and safe spaces for children
- Provide psychosocial support to children

## Coping Strategies

### “I TAUGHT MY CHILDREN TO USE GUNS TO DEFEND THEMSELVES IF I DIE.”

—Discussion with men

Girls, boys, women and men cope with violence in different ways. Men or boys may resort to violence, dialogue, seeking support from relatives or, in a few cases, protection from the authorities when deemed appropriate. Women and girls have fewer means to respond to violence, and victims of violence also face discrimination from their relatives and the community. Any denouncement of domestic violence is likely to end in divorce with the victim in a more disadvantaged situation and often deprived of any economic means. **Girls said that they feel powerless and that their families might not always support them if they suffered sexual abuse or harassment.** Men noted that they prefer to seek support within the family or from close friends to avoid spreading knowledge on such sensitive issues. Children recognise that they feel more confident to denounce cases of violence at school.

The participants reported that there **are few formal or specialised facilities supporting survivors of violence.** There are shelters for female victims of domestic violence, but these women's houses only provide shelter for women who

This elderly man sits on the site, where his family home once stood. Alone and afraid, he does not have enough funds to rebuild his house. He regularly visits the desolate ruins he once called home to collect iron and other worthy items to sell for cash. A familiar place, he spent so many happy years, now reduced to rubble and rocks.



are victims of violence from their husbands and are not geared towards younger victims of violence. All groups noted that more centres for psychological treatment are needed. There are only a few health centres offering medical treatment, but they lack dedicated staff to treat psychological problems.

Displaced Syrian families **rely on a variety of coping mechanisms** to meet their basic needs: day-to-day labour, humanitarian assistance, financial support from relatives, or they are forced to leave Syria for other destinations. Some families have reduced the size and number of meals per day, are spending less on non-food items or are growing their own produce. Many families sent their sons to Turkey for work to help cover the basic needs of the family. Some single or widowed women have received support from other members of the community. Many men have often opted for joining armed groups to safeguard themselves and their families.

**“I KNOW ABOUT SOME PARENTS THAT GAVE THEIR CHILD IN ADOPTION TO ANOTHER FAMILY BECAUSE THEY WERE UNABLE TO BUY MILK OR BASIC SUPPLIES.”**

—Discussion with men

**Freedom of movement is restricted** due to security barriers within the country and at the borders. Men and boys fear forced conscription and recruitment into armed groups. There is a perception that women are subject to fewer travel restrictions, nevertheless women in the focus groups declared that they suffer similar restrictions from the local authorities because **armed groups use women to perpetrate terrorist attacks**. Everyone has to carry their identification documents

at all times. People who have lost their IDs find it difficult to obtain a new one. Boys and girls indicated that identification documents are only issued for adults (over 18 years old) and that many new-borns are not registered as a result of a deficient registration system.

**“MOST YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUR AGE DO NOT HAVE IDENTITY DOCUMENTS.”**

—Discussion with boy



## THE FEMALE HOUSEHOLD

“...now those dreams are gone, along with him and along with all of his other dreams.”

“We were very scared,” remembers Sameh as she recounts the night her husband Jalal was killed. “I asked him to go see what was happening outside on the street. There was lots of noise and we heard gun shots in the distance. He told me he didn’t want to go out because he didn’t want to leave me and our daughters alone. But I told him not to be scared and to go out and look.”

Sameh pauses to take a breath as she remembers that fateful evening a few months ago. “He was killed that night while standing in the middle of the road. Then so many others were killed on that same road, out of nowhere. After that one moment, we were all alone, without protection and without any preparation for our future.”

Sameh is 40 years old, a widow, and now sole provider for five children and Jalal’s mother, Nawwar. The home they share has been badly damaged by shelling in several places since Jalal died.

“We live in a state of fear,” Sameh says. “What if what happened to my husband happens to me? What will happen to my children and their grandmother? I am anxious all the time.”

Without an income, the family relies on the generosity of others. Their neighbours provide great support, and Sameh also receives food vouchers from Concern. “I thank God for everything I have still and for the kindness of those around me. Recently, someone provided us with enough money to purchase winter clothes for all the children, for example. But I am always afraid that the help will stop. How will I manage then?”

The family’s vulnerability as a primarily female household is also a worry. The girls go to school not too far from the family home but tell their mother that they feel scared on the way.

“My husband used to talk about teaching the girls how to drive,” Sameh remembers. “But now those dreams are gone, along with him and along with all of his other dreams.”



## THE BEREAVED GRANDFATHER

“...a man who has lost his children and is living with his young grandsons.”

Ahmed Safar is 70 and a father of five children. His family has been destroyed by the war. Initially, two of his sons were kidnapped and killed by an armed group. A third son was later also kidnapped and held for ransom. Although Ahmed was a rich man before the war, he wasn't able to raise the ransom within the 24 hour deadline, and so this son was also killed. A remaining brother couldn't accept what had happened to his siblings, couldn't eat for a long time, got cancer and eventually died a few months ago. Ahmed's only daughter was also kidnapped and is currently missing. Having been displaced a total of six times in the last six years, he now lives with his young grandchildren in northern Syria. “How can I explain what has happened,” he tells us. “It is a difficult situation to describe: a state of humiliation and suffering only God knows. What can a 70 year old man say...a man who has lost all his children and is living with his young grandsons.”

# OUR COMMITMENTS, OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND CALLS TO ACTION

Displaced for more than two years, this family is among thousands of others who have built temporary mud shelters in remote desert areas, far away from war lines.

**“By providing targeted education support, it is possible to reduce a child’s vulnerability to exploitation in the labour market.”**



The case studies and focus group discussions in this report provide an insight into the all-pervasive violence that now, six years into the conflict, permeates every aspect of Syrian life and society, shattering lives, families and communities. They remind us of the desperate protection needs within Syria and the urgency that is required to address this conflict in 2017. As we pass six years since the beginning of the war, Concern is making a series of commitments, operational recommendations, and outlining a number of calls to action directed at the international community of UN member states and international donors. These calls must be urgently addressed if the catastrophic humanitarian situation within Syria is to be reversed in 2017.

## Our Commitments

- On the ground humanitarian response**  
Concern has been working inside Syria for four years now and is currently reaching over 390,000 people within the country. As a result of this report, we will be deepening our response to the protection issues that have been identified, **working to prioritise the issues highlighted by our beneficiaries such as gender based violence, the spread of diseases, and the prevention of child labour.** We will do this through deepening the reach of our water and sanitation programmes, expanding gender based violence awareness programmes and the expansion of training programmes such as the highly successful “Engaging men and boys to reduce domestic violence” which we have rolled out in Lebanon; and through the provision of safe spaces and education and awareness programmes.
- International advocacy**  
Concern, will use all of its centres of influence, including its leadership of Alliance2015, to push for a comprehensive diplomatic resolution to the conflict. We are also urging for full and unimpeded humanitarian access to affected populations and the protection of civilians in Syria. We commit to amplifying this voice, calling on the international community to exercise greater leverage in seeking solutions to the conflict and to compel parties to the conflict to adhere to International Humanitarian Law.

## Operational Recommendations

Based on the protection threats articulated in this report by Syrians, there are a number of operational recommendations that must be considered in attempting to address protection concerns within Syria:

- Participation of children in conflict**—Considering that a large number of Syrians have been forced or convinced to join armed groups and to take part in hostilities, greater efforts must be made **to raise awareness** of the risks of such actions through social media and other channels, **while facilitating recreational spaces and access to education as an alternative to taking part in conflict.** While this will not address forced conscription, it will provide children with knowledge that may convince them not to join voluntarily. An emphasis also needs to be placed on information sessions with families to analyse and think through their options to help mitigate the risk of children becoming fighters.
- Community coping strategies and available services**—Girls, boys, men, and women cope with violence in different ways. Women and girls feel that they have fewer means to respond to violence. They may face discrimination and stigma in the family and in the community if they denounce any instances of sexual abuse or harassment. Greater attention needs to be given to providing a more comprehensive service of psychosocial support and increasing safe spaces where the victims can freely express themselves.
- Child labour**—Many children work in hazardous jobs to contribute to the family income. It is recommended that interventions emphasise improving the livelihood security of households, especially for unaccompanied and separated children. Much greater recognition must be given to the fact that financial support initiatives such as cash transfers provide badly needed resources for vulnerable households. Furthermore, by providing targeted education support, it is possible to reduce a child’s vulnerability to exploitation in the labour market.
- Separated and unaccompanied children**—The discussion findings highlight the need for education, vocational training and psychosocial support for Syrian children who have been separated from their families or who have lost their parents as a result of the conflict. The majority of participants indicated that most orphan and separated children receive care from community members. Nevertheless, participants believe that there is a need for greater engagement with community networks to ensure the additional specialised support required for these children is in place.

## Calls to Action

Throughout 2017, Concern will continue to advocate for a peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict so that, sooner rather than later, the war will end and ordinary Syrians can begin to reclaim their lives. Concern welcomes the appointment of the new UN Secretary General, António Guterres, his commitment to seek a 'surge in diplomacy for peace' and the fact that he has stated that his top priority for 2017 is peace in Syria.

Concern has a number of calls to action for the international community and the United Nations but **our central message is that humanitarian aid cannot be used as a substitute for failed diplomacy or the lack of political will to find solutions to this protracted and devastating conflict.**

As such, we call on:

1. **UN member states** to urgently forge a comprehensive diplomatic strategy for a lasting peace in Syria. Syria is the greatest protection crisis of our time and will continue to be so unless there is a comprehensive diplomatic strategy for a political resolution to the conflict. A lasting peace implies the protection of human rights and the prosecution of those responsible for mass atrocity crimes and crimes against humanity. We believe that UN Secretary General, António Guterres's prioritisation of peace in Syria provides hope and look forward to him taking urgent diplomatic action in this regard. We call on member states to support the Secretary General's prioritisation of peace.
2. **Parties to the conflict** to implement an immediate cease fire and guarantee access to humanitarian aid. Civilian populations' access to humanitarian aid and the negotiation of safe humanitarian space has become increasingly difficult in Syria as siege and starvation tactics have become the norm, in open violation of International Humanitarian Law. Denial of access to the essentials for survival is systematically being employed as a weapon of war to force surrender. It is a slower but no less grave a protection threat than death from direct violence. Concern calls on all parties to the conflict to respect International Humanitarian Law, implement an immediate and lasting cease fire, and to allow full and unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians inside Syria.
3. **The United Nations Security Council** to uphold the obligations outlined in UN Resolution 1674 in relation to the Protection of Civilians. The adoption of UN Resolution 1674 in 2006 was heralded as a potentially seminal moment in promoting the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The conflict in Syria has been beset with countless incidents in which civilians have been targeted and International Humanitarian Law has been violated. Concern calls on the UN Security Council to demand that all parties to the conflict uphold their obligations to protect civilians, respect the humanitarian principles, and promote the safety, security and freedom of movement of humanitarian personnel as set forth in UN Resolution 1674.
4. **UN member states and donors** to increase funding for humanitarian protection programming. Despite an increasing recognition that protection must form a central pillar of humanitarian response, it remains drastically underfunded, with a gap of over 75% of requirements in each of the last two years.<sup>16</sup> As this report shows, a considerable amount of protection funding should be prioritised for programming for the most vulnerable groups. However, in order for this funding to be effective, sustained access, is essential.

17 Financial Tracking Service—Syria Humanitarian Response Plan 2016. Available at: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/501/summary>



This little girl is from a family of nine, who arrived with hundreds of other families to set up a temporary home at this refugee camp. Just out of shot, her parents are pitching a tent, where they will live with another large family, who fled the same town as them. Concern is providing hygiene kits and food baskets for the two families. According to the Concern staff member, who took the photo, the girl is closing her eyes and playing in the dirt – a momentary escape from the awful reality of her family's situation playing out in front of her.

## Conclusion

In 2011, life for most ordinary Syrians was drastically different to what it is today. Syria was a middle-income country with a relatively high average life expectancy and development status. Over the last six years, the country has been relentlessly ripped apart by one of the most fiercely destructive conflicts since the Second World War. Echoing the devastation that has been experienced in neighbouring Iraq since 2003, the Syrian war has descended into the most complex and seemingly intractable crisis on earth. What was once an area of relative stability is now a country experiencing astonishingly high levels of violence and chaos.

In the midst of the fighting, it is the ordinary Syrian people whose lives have been shattered. The numbers of people who have been killed or injured, who have been forced to flee their homes in droves from the intense conflict, or whose lives have been taken or ruined, are impossible to comprehend. But we need to keep their experience at the forefront of our minds. That is why we have chosen to spotlight the experiences of individual Syrians in this report. Protection programming, at its core, is about reaffirming the humanity in humanitarian response. It is about ensuring that, even in the most dire of circumstances, we do not lose sight of the inherent worth of every individual caught up in this catastrophic war.

It is this humanity that must compel us not only to provide the most robust protection services possible, but also to find a reinvigorated urgency to end the conflict in Syria, and begin the long process of recovery.

This war will end, but the long-term psychosocial and societal damage will take generations to repair.

Rebuilding infrastructure will take time. Rebuilding shattered lives will take much longer.

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# SHATTERED LIVES