

AGE OF UNREST

Syrian Refugee Youth at the Crossroads

Executive Summary

Across the Middle East, millions of young people are struggling with what to do with their lives. In many ways, they're like so many teenagers and young adults around the world. They have big questions about who they want to be, how they want to live and where they see their future. But there's one big difference: their life direction will fundamentally influence the chances for peace and stability in one of the world's most fragile places.

Among them are over 1 million Syrian refugee youth seeking safety in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq.¹ Until now, they have been a largely forgotten group even amid a massive aid operation. They are so overlooked as a group that we can't even say with certainty how many Syrian refugees are between the ages of 12 and 19 — or how much of the aid budget is spent on them.

Torn from their homes by a savage war, scarred by violence and loss, this generation risks alienation and hopelessness. They will be driven to wager their lives on deadly migration routes or live on the edge of society, suffering discrimination, abuse and exploitation. They will be prey to a violent extremism that feeds on a sense of injustice, grievance and isolation.

Yet even in this bleak reality, they offer hope and possibility. They imagine a different future. They yearn to go back to Syria and rebuild. They are ambitious and hardworking. Young Syrians can be engines for growth and prosperity in the countries of their exile — and a promise of reconciliation and reconstruction when Syria finally has peace.

Around the world, Mercy Corps' work helps people meet the urgent needs of today while building the resilience needed for tomorrow. Nowhere is this more urgent than in the Syria crisis. Mercy Corps has been working with Syrians since the start of the war. We've reached nearly 7.5 million people with aid since 2012, gaining insight into their everyday lives and long-term dreams, building evidence for what works and what doesn't.

We firmly believe a better world is possible for these million-plus young people. We can help Syrian youth realize their promise and build stronger communities from within. But we must move now, deliver big and act smart.



Sami, 15, lives in Gaziantep, Turkey, after fleeing fierce fighting in Syria's largest city, Aleppo. "I want to do something and be remembered ... There's nothing for me back in Syria. My house and my school were destroyed. But I still want to go back someday and help rebuild the country."

All photos: Peter Biro for Mercy Corps

¹ Accurate data for the refugee adolescent population in the region remain largely out of reach. Mercy Corps' definition of "adolescence" — 10 to 19 years of age — overlaps with the UN's definition of "youth" — 15 to 24 years of age. UNICEF reports some 2.4 million refugees are children under 18 and about 823,000 are youth between 17 and 24.

Here is the path forward.

First, see the big picture.

We need to properly map where young Syrians are living, how many there are and what their needs are. We need to understand all the complex power dynamics in the communities and societies where Syrian refugees live, and build connections across these communities. Our work in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq teaches us that young people don't live their lives separated out into different boxes.



Bassam, 17, is from Daraa in southwestern Syria. He left in 2012 and works 12 hours a day in a small textile factory in the Jordanian city of Irbid. “As Syrian youth, we need to fulfill our dream first and foremost. We need to resume our normal lives.”

We need to help them so that all their needs — physical, emotional, educational and economic — are discussed, addressed and acted upon.

Second, make young people real partners in change.

Aid alone merely pays lip service to the voices and needs of young people. Instead, we need to empower them, listen to them and give them a real voice in shaping concrete decisions. We need to involve them in deciding the shape and focus of aid programs that seek to help them. Our research shows that young people see injustice, exclusion and unfairness as decisive factors in whether or not they support violent extremism.² We need to help youth see alternatives that give them a sense of purpose and status without turning to violence. This means making sure the voices of Syrian refugee youth are front and center in shaping how we help them — and that they're heard by the people who make the decisions that frame their lives.

Third, focus on well-being, education and employment

Well-being: Syrian youth are under great stress at a critical time in their lives. Violence, discrimination, abuse, lack of education, poverty, exploitative labor — any of these shocks could derail them. Mercy Corps' Advancing Adolescents initiative gives young people a path out. We help them understand their stresses, work through problems in a non-violent way, and make good decisions for the long term. This approach can be scaled up and rolled out so that every young Syrian — alongside vulnerable youths in host communities — can benefit.

Education for all: In addition to supporting the international push to get every Syrian child and youth back into school, Mercy Corps believes that a fresh approach is needed to reach the hundreds of thousands of youth who have dropped out of school and won't be going back to formal education. Mercy Corps is testing and rolling out education models that can be replicated at scale so that Syrians and other marginalized youth can acquire the skills in demand on the labor market, learning in the places where they live or work, in the language that's best for them.

Safe, fair and decent jobs: Mercy Corps is calling on the international community and regional governments to set up special “enterprise funds” focused on expanding employment for refugees and other poor young people. Enterprise funds are public/private partnerships that invest in small and medium businesses. They're driven by the demands of the labor market and they focus on what works, what sells and what can create jobs. They are a tested and powerful way to drive economic growth and social inclusion.

² For more details, see “Youth and Consequences” (2014), “From Jordan to Jihad” (2014) or “Investing in Iraq's Peace” (2015), available online at <http://mercycorps.org/research-resources>.

We need something different.

Business as usual will not deliver the change that's needed. We need to find new ways for big business, civil society, Middle Eastern governments and the international system to work together smarter. Smart assistance that puts youth at the center of how it is managed and delivered, and is open to all marginalized young people. A new network of partnerships delivering tailored assistance over the long term, so vulnerable young people make the right choices, build self-reliance, get good educations, win jobs, start businesses and contribute to their communities.

The time is now.

A young generation stands on the threshold of adulthood. The years of adolescence are crucial to how people form or shun connections, how they relate to others and how they view the use of violence. Each day that passes degrades our ability to help young Syrians and their local peers repair themselves before bitter experience hardens into habit. We can help young people build constructive lives — but this needs to happen fast and deliver at scale. We can help young Syrians realize their promise as agents of change, peace and stability.

Join us in making this real.
Join our call for change.
#SyriaYouth



Sema, 17, is from Aleppo and now lives in Gaziantep, Turkey. She dreams of becoming a doctor. "I do not want my future to be like my past. This is my main motivation; the need to exit this past and create a different and better future."

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.