



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

2016 Worst year for Syrian Children

Sarah Akram, Research Fellow, ISSI

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The Syrian civil war, one of the worst in recent history, has caused immense devastation and anarchy and continues to do so. However, the worst has happened for Syria's innocent children as 2016 has been



declared as the most horrible year for Syrian children. A new UNICEF report titled "*How 2016 Became the Worst Year for Syria's Children*"¹ has revealed that hundreds of children in Syria have been killed and numerous others have been affected in a variety of ways. So far, 652 children have been killed as the civil war enters its sixth year.² The unprecedented suffering continues to mar the lives of a very fragile generation, thus depriving them access to food, medicine, shelter and education.

The number of children killed in the war is the highest total since UNICEF has confirmed the number of deaths in the conflict. According to the UNICEF report, schools, hospitals, playgrounds and other areas frequently used by children are becoming increasingly insecure as they are targets for attacks. UNICEF says at least 255 children were killed in or near schools in 2016. The bleak report adds that 6 million children in Syria depend on humanitarian aid, but about 250,000 children remain in besieged areas, cut off from receiving aid. Lack of medical assistance and doctors has also led to more children dying from easily treatable illnesses or injuries. As the situation in Syria deteriorates, families have been forced to take extreme measures, including pushing their children into hard labour or early marriages. More than 850 children were pushed into combat in 2016, twice as many as in 2015, UNICEF reported.³

One of the many affects of this civil war has been the use of child soldiers owing to their vulnerability and exploitation by armed factions.⁴ One of the most alarming after effects of this conflict on children has been adverse psychological damage in the shape of "toxic stress", as reported by a Save the Children report.⁵ The psychological toll on children has led them towards self harm and suicide due to prolonged exposure to war. The main cause of psychological stress has been the constant shelling and bombardment that characterises the war. Schools and hospitals have been regularly targeted,

destroying the very institutions that can support traumatised children when they need it most. The damage is irreversible and permanent as the war continues to shatter lives in Syria. The long-term effects of war on Syria's children are most likely to be seen the shape of mental stress disorders, as well as being prone to addiction in later ages including an added trend towards aggressive behaviours.

The Syrian civil war has destroyed an entire generation of young children, who remain out of school with absolutely no access to the basic amenities of life. And, as the civil war rages, the future situation is likely to be grim. The international community must take solid steps to ensure that Syria's most vulnerable children are saved from the trauma of civil war, which is only possible if the warring factions are brought to the negotiating table. It must also be ensured that the bombing of hospitals, schools and play grounds is also prevented. The tragic tale of Syria's children has made headlines, but has unfortunately not evoked any serious responses from the international community, other than condemnations, which merely are not enough.

Notes and References:

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- ¹ How 2016 Became the Worst Year for Syria's Children (<https://www.unicef.org/au/about-us/media/march/hitting-rock-bottom-children-s-suffering-in-syria>)
 - ² UNICEF: 2016 was the worst year yet for Children in Syria at <http://www.dw.com/en/unicef-2016-was-the-worst-year-yet-for-children-in-syria/a-37912574>
 - ³ Ibid.
 - ⁴ Syrian children faced worst year yet in 2016, UN says, *The Telegraph* at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/13/syrian-children-faced-worst-year-yet-2016-un-says/>
 - ⁵ Save the Children report: Syrian children suffering 'toxic stress' at <http://www.dw.com/en/save-the-children-report-syrian-children-suffering-toxic-stress/a-37833953>