



January 2019



"If the Hazard Gap is Not Bridged," An Illiterate Generation Would "Arise"

*The Ongoing Armed Conflict Idlib and Hama
Leads to Cognitive Decline*

***"If the Hazard Gap is Not Bridged, An Illiterate
Generation Would Arise"***

*The Ongoing Armed Conflict Idlib and Hama Leads to Cognitive
Decline*

The seven-year long Syrian armed conflict has left a grave negative impact on children, the most vulnerable category, nationwide Syria, particularly in the provinces of Idlib and Hama. Many children encounter the threat of becoming illiterate or merely knowing the basic principles of reading and writing. The ongoing armed conflict and its ramifications of bombardment, destruction, and displacement have negatively affected the children and caused them to fall behind. There is a wide gap between the children's chronological and intelligence age. For example, an 11-year-old child could not pass the third grade of his primary school because of his inability to concentrate or absorb information.

The United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund/ UNICEF said in a statement¹ on April 23, 2018 "the seven-year long conflict has caused 2.8 million children to miss out on their education. some of these children have never been to school, while others have missed out on up to seven years of learning, making it extremely difficult for them to catch up.

Since the conflict began in 2011, 309 education facilities came under attack and one in three schools can no longer be used because they were destroyed, damaged, used for military purposes or for hosting displaced families. Nearly 40 per cent of children who are out of school are between 15 and 17 years-old, making them prey to exploitation including early marriage, recruitment into the fighting and child labor."

The war has not only killed and displaced children, but also affected their psychological situation. They have begun to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders/PTSD that lead to dangerous consequences, notably the cognitive decline.

Education is the main pillar and the backbone that the children count on it to build their future, STJ's field researcher said.

Death, falling behind and distractions are inevitable consequences of the on-going war. STJ has published a report on the death of 12 children and the injury of 25 others in al-Raqqa city as a result of detonation of landmines while they were collecting junks.²

An STJ's report about Hama said a wide section of children under the age of 15 years old are forced to do different jobs. They face exploitation and dangerous experiences amidst the lack of censorship and accountability from local authorities, which follow laws prohibiting child labor under the age of 15 not 18.³

¹ "Nearly 5 million Syrian children accessing education despite over seven years of war on children", UNICEF, April 23, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/unicef-syria-PR-en.pdf>

² "Children Victims of Collecting Junks in al-Raqqa", STJ, November 10, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/ar/view/953>.

³ "The Prevalence of the Worst Forms of Child Labour in the City of Hama, Amidst the Lack of Censorship and Accountability", STJ, November 20, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/ar/view/987>.

I. "I visualize my brother and my relatives as if they are still living with me"

The ongoing hostilities in Hama areas have turned many children's lives upside down and shattered their future. The 15-year-old boy Abbas al-Khalid, from Jabal Shahshbo in the west, suffered PTSD because of the death of his father, his brother, and his grandfather. Their death made him feel misery and he lost concentration at school. He failed in the ninth grade in 2017 and was forced to repeat the exams once again:

"I was in the primary stage and I used to live with my family. But with the onset of the war, my life turned upside down. I experienced extreme tough days. Almost every day, I woke up by the roars of bombardment and my family's voices saying we had to displace soon. During the years of war, I lost numerous of my family members. My little brother, my grandfather, my father and my uncle were all killed in 2013, 2014, and 2015 respectively. Currently, I live with my mother. Last year I was in the ninth grade in the elementary stage, but I failed my exams though I studied. My family rebuked me for my failure. But that was the best I did. I still hear my brother and my relatives' voices as if they are still living with us. I tried hard to study but in vain. I got overstrained and most of the times I burst into tears without knowing why".

The scenes of demolition and the shattered bodies Abbas used to see during the bombardment made him suffer a trauma, which he could not be treated from:

"Although I am studying the ninth grade once again, I have a feeling that I won't pass it. I cannot concentrate nor can I memorize information. I cannot even have fun with my friends. I feel devastated inside. I hope I could overcome this feeling. I wish peace prevails in the whole world so that everyone lives freely".

II. "He is in the fourth grade in the primary stage but has difficulties learning to read and write"

Aboud al-Hussein, 10, is a child from al-Labweb town in the south of Idlib. Over the last few years, al-Labweb, among others, was exposed to fierce bombardment by the Syrian regular forces. The solo school in the town was partially destroyed. Therefore, every morning Aboud walks to that school, he feels panic. He is in the fourth grade but the fear within his heart turned him to a child with difficulties to read and write.

His father recalled:

"Aboud grew up in a frightening atmosphere because of severe bombardment and homelessness. He has lost his dearest friends and relatives. Up to now, he has got ballistophobia. He is overwhelmed by panic whenever he sees an aircraft or hears shelling; his fear lasts even after the shelling stops. Following the de-militarized zone agreement⁴ concluded about Idlib and the relative-tranquility, we expected that everybody, including children, would get rid of this undesirable psychological condition. Unfortunately, they did not. This condition affected Aboud's education and his general awareness. At first, we ignored this situation but later it evolved to become an abnormal condition especially when he became in the fourth grade. We could observe his unwilling to get education, to do his homework, as well as he becomes introvert. Now we do try our best to help him learn by inserting him in an atmosphere of fun, joy and giving him presents. But this is not working out either. His level of understanding and his ability to memorize information deteriorated. Education is none of his concerns."

⁴ "Turkey declares Idlib a de-militarized zone", RT, October 10, 2018.

<https://english.rt.com/middle-east/975410-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9/>



The child Aboud al-Hussein from rural Idlib.

Photo credit: Aboud's family

Many children in Idlib areas face the same problems Aboud suffers because of the psychological stress they experienced during the seven-year war. Let alone the traditional ways in teaching and neglecting the children's psychological side, the father added.

The household, the community, and the school should act together to heal all the children across Syria, he added.

III. The cognitive decline has reached its most

Yehiya Ahmad Mesfara, 48, is a teacher from Saraqib city in Idlib. Yehiya has been a teacher for 20 years and has taught all school stages. He told STJ that the children's level of concentration has declined since the onset of the conflict, and that many of them suffer excessive psychological condition.

"Being a teacher in a primary school that contains 170 pupils from the 1st grade to the 6th grade, I could apparently observe that the armed conflict has its genuine impact on the children. I spotted a deep crack in their personality and psychology. They have lost self-confidence besides they acquired many impolite behaviors and habits. Concerning the cognitive decline, I can say that the pupils before the conflict were better. They could study and

memorize better. They could understand their lessons more quickly. Unfortunately, they have become less focused and have less ability to memorize and sometimes we are forced to repeat the same lesson several times for them to understand it. Sometimes I feel as if we are dealing with a generation different from the previous one. Has the fear of death caused them to lose memory? Are they affected with a psychological disorder? We do not know. All we know is that their cognitive decline has reached its utmost in Idlib and Hama. Now we try to communicate with the children through some entertainment activities to get to their inners hoping find out what the reason is for this problem".

The teacher said the cognitive decline has affected the 11-years-old children most. He said that there is a wide part who missed out on school in the last few years particularly the boys.

"In my opinion, the solution is to follow a special teaching way different from the traditional teaching methods. The most important thing is not to assign the pupils with lots of homework. We should be patient with them and apply a strong teaching plan through leisure picnics and various activities. Additionally, we should avoid rebuke and violence because this category of children is sensitive, and they got enough. Eventually, if this grave gap is not bridged, an illiterate generation would arise".

IV. "An uneducated child is much better than a dead one"

Fawaz Aslan, an educational supervisor and a psychological support worker in Idlib, testified that the instability that the children experienced have a grave negative impact on the level of their educational awareness and understanding of information. Prevalently, parents chose not to send their children to school because of the insecurity; they say, "an uneducated child is much better than a dead one".

"Many children in Idlib suffer from instability and educational awareness decline. There is a gap between the children's chronological and intelligence age. Some 11-year-old children cannot pass the 3rd grade in the primary stage, i.e. they are late developer. They lack the ability to understand or concentrate on their lessons. 20 per cent of the pupils have dropped out from school, this means 200 pupils out of 600. Therefore, we have opened a special classroom to make it up for those who missed out on and another classroom for those who have cognitive decline. They are being taught by specialists

following special methods in order to develop the children's awareness and thinking".

Abdullah al-Zeidan agreed. He said footages of the Syrian conflict have affected the children's psychology side and caused a kind of behavior disorder. They suffer from increase of violence, concern about the future, malnutrition, mental disorders, and depression. All that leaves a bad effect on the children's social life whether within their household or outside.

It should be recalled that Abdullah has a got degree in psychology and he is the head of a psychological support team in Atama city in the north of Idlib.

"The consequences varies from a child to another based on the events surrounding them. Some children are somehow careless, but others react deeply against every incident taking place around them. This negatively affect their mental and psychological sides. It is right that the cognitive decline and the unwilling to learn were common before the conflict, but they have spread significantly during the war. After the end of the war, some children might suffer PTSD symptoms: children express their anxieties by reflecting them in paintings or through nightmares or acting violently."

A successful teaching process with effective methods should be provided in armed opposition groups-controlled areas in Idlib and Hama, al-Zedan said. Children should feel at ease in and out home to be able to improve at school.

"Several factors affected the children's academic education such as the destruction of many schools in Idlib and Hama in the past years, insecurity, and the ill-prepared curricula and teachers. Additionally, displacement has resulted to make them live in different environment and make new friends each time. So, they suffered cognitive decline. To solve this problem, you need to avoid the triggers which are still ongoing. However, the causes are hard to get rid of because of the armed conflict. Hence, we should attempt to provide a safe atmosphere somehow to the children. In addition to a modern curriculum that teaches them the principals of reading and writing from the beginning very slowly. Only then we can uncover the reasons that make the children unwilling to learn. After that, we can mitigate these reasons as much as possible and describe them to the children in a simple impartial way that they could understand".

V. "40 per cent miss out on school as a result of stress and hate to study"

Salah al-Khattab, the chief of the school health of the Syrian Interim Government in Hama, said the recent growing ratio of the students who dropped out of school is the outcome of stress and extreme hate to study. The high school students are the most who miss out on. The psychological impacts the war has left behind can be obviously seen on the children from all educational stages in Hama and Idlib. The children have become unwilling to pursue their academic education. They have lost the ability to memorize and understand lessons well.

"we, the staff in the school health department, are still attempting to help the children overcome this stage. We want them to form a different view about the Syrian situation. We want to put them on a new path that can reform their education and make them love learning. A new project was introduced to the sponsor organizations and they agreed to implement it. the project is to have a staff of doctors including psychologists, physicians, nurses who will conduct periodic visits to schools, particularly the primary schools, in order to secure an easy educational atmosphere. An atmosphere that will make them feel relax and desire to study. Regarding the students who drop out of school, it is definitely because of stress and the children's rejection to study amidst shelling and homelessness. 40% of the high school students have dropped out from schools in areas in Hama.

The phenomenon of mental dispersion and cognitive decline will not be completely eliminated unless there is a child-friendly space. However, we can convert the child's mind calmly from thinking of war to the state of studying and getting information through guided activities, which are conducted and supervised by experts", al-Khattab said.



About Syrians for Truth and Justice:

STJ is an independent, nongovernmental organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (females and males) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

-
- 🌐 www.stj-sy.com
 - 📘 [syriaSTJ](https://www.facebook.com/syriaSTJ)
 - 🐦 [@STJ_SYRIA_ENG](https://twitter.com/STJ_SYRIA_ENG)
 - 📷 [Syrians for Truth & Justice](https://www.instagram.com/Syrians_for_Truth_Justice)
 - ✉ editor@stj-sy.org