

# NEED FOR MORE SUPPORT AND INCLUSION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN SYRIA

ACHRS STATEMENT | ZELAL AG



Since the war in Syria, many people living in the affected regions depend on external aid. In some cases, the most vulnerable in society have been neglected. Children with disabilities affected by the war lack the necessary resources to ensure a safe, healthy, inclusive, and supportive environment.

The conflict in Syria has now almost entered its 12th year. During this time, many Syrians have fled the country, with those who have stayed behind consequently facing many problems and hardships. A recent report by Human Rights Watch now sheds light on one particular group of people, namely children with disabilities, who suffer greatly in the circumstances and from a lack of support. Approximately 28 per cent of Syrians have a disability, including children who already had disabilities before the war but also as a result of the war. Interviews with them and their family members living in the northwest and northeast of Syria revealed the discrimination they face daily.

## Challenges of Children With Disabilities

*"Many times, I refused to leave the house to try to escape; it was just too difficult for me to run with crutches. It would take several people to help me get into the car, which would make them an easy target for an airstrike.*

*I wanted to avoid exposing other people to that risk."*

— Thara J, who lost a leg in an airstrike in 2015 when she was 13.

Living in an active war zone generally puts everyone at risk of contingencies such as bombings, massacres, kidnappings, and raw force. Families are often confronted with the fear of bringing their families to safety and protecting them from these acts of violence. Those with children with disabilities face additional challenges.



They often cannot simply run away and seek safety with their family members, reliant on outside assistance to help them escape. This often presents these families with an impossible ultimatum, do they help their children escape but risk travelling slower and thus becoming a vulnerable target, or do they leave their children behind in the hope that all will be well? Situations like these highlight the increased vulnerability of children with disabilities and their families in active war zones and the importance of paying special attention to them.

*"The most difficult thing is that we don't have specialised centres with trained teachers. We are responsible for these children. Everybody, humanity is responsible."*

— Father of Ibrahim, a child with Autism and ADHD, living in northern Syria.

In addition to their immediate problems, these children are subjected to many indirect problems in their daily lives. Children with mental and physical disabilities often need special support to cope with their daily lives. This includes material things like wheelchairs, hearing aids, crutches etc., as well as access to health care and therapy. This goes along with the involvement of trained staff and personnel who provide supportive surroundings that will help the children to participate equally with other children. Furthermore, it is also crucial to establish a safe and inclusive environment in which children are shielded from discrimination based on stereotypes and prejudice about people with disabilities, which can be an additional burden to the pre-existing trauma of war.

### **Political Games Complicate Access to Humanitarian Aid**

Beyond all the challenges of children with disabilities due to their way of life, there are political ploys that further complicate access to humanitarian aid. Since 2014, the UN Security Council ('UNSC') has ensured humanitarian access across Turkey's border into Syria without the involvement of the Syrian government. This year, however, a possible threat by Russia to veto the move restricted border crossings. As a result, the transport of aid agencies to northwest Syria has been complicated, and access to the northeast has been cut off. Moreover, in July, the UN Security Council authorised cross-border aid shipments for only six months, which will expire this winter and make it harder for agencies to support Syrians, affecting the population shortly. Charities such as Action for Humanity and others working in northwest Syria have reported a decline in programmes due to reduced funding and donations, which could threaten vulnerable children in the country in the long term.

## United Nations Human Rights on People with Disabilities

As children and then as part of the disability community, children with disabilities are granted special advocacy under the United Nations Human Rights. The UN has established the Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities specifically with the purpose “to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity”.

Article 7 explicitly provides for the rights of children with disabilities, stating that:

- 1) All necessary measures must be taken to ensure that children with disabilities enjoy the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children and,
- 3) Necessary resources are to be provided to ensure inclusivity for children with disabilities and for them to participate on an equal basis with other children.

Moreover, the convention holistically includes issues of equality and non-discrimination, awareness raising, accessibility, and health to guarantee that the human rights of every person with a disability are upheld.

As a member of the UN, Syria is obliged to fulfil its duty to protect and ensure that these exact human rights are fulfilled for all its children with disability, and every other member of the United Nations is obliged to support Syria in doing so.

### ACHRS' Position

ACHRS condemns all forms of discrimination against persons with disabilities and calls on the Syrian government and the United Nations to guarantee sufficient resources and support to provide every child with disabilities in Syria with the necessary aid to ensure equal opportunities in society.

Given this, ACHRS supports organisations such as UNICEF's Integrated Social Protection Program or Caritas MONA that facilitate training, education and financial aid for children with disabilities affected by the war and its aftermath in Syria. To continue the availability of resources and help in the future, we must create more awareness for the affected children, including sufficient representation to provide them with the necessary help through internal and external authorities!

## References:

Syria: Children with Disabilities Left Unprotected, "It Was Really Hard to Protect Myself", Empowering children with disabilities in Aleppo, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, A grandmother's unwavering love, Syria: How a Deadly Conflict Impacts Children with Disabilities

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Image sourced via UNICEF