



# LEFT BEHIND

A generation of Syrian refugees have been forced to leave their childhoods at the border as they take on the responsibility of providing for their families in a strange country.

Ten-year-old Abdul appears shell-shocked and cannot recall where he is from in Syria. He works seven days a week and makes less than \$0.9 an hour. “I don’t go to school,” he says. “I just work. It’s okay.”  
[David Lapeska]



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Ahmed Zain wakes at seven and extricates himself from his two older brothers, with whom he shares a bed. With heavy eyes and limbs, he pulls on his clothes, drinks a glass of water and hops on his rusty bicycle for the half-mile ride to work, a butcher's shop and restaurant on a lively main drag in the small, shabby border city of Kilis, Turkey.

The conflict a few miles away, in neighbouring Syria, has churned on for three-and-a-half years, killing 200,000 people and displacing about 10 million. Some 3.3 million Syrians have fled into neighbouring countries, nearly half of them – about 1.6 million – into Turkey.

*In Kilis, Syrians now outnumber locals.*

*Checkpoints mark the main roads into the city and motorcycles roar down the narrow, rubbish-strewn streets at its centre, kicking up dust. Barefoot toddlers tug on the jackets of passersby, offering a package of tissues and an open palm. An aged shopkeeper's street-side display features everything from blunt butchers knives to old 45's, bug spray and loose keys.*

Zain arrives at Berat Family Butcher, a tiny shop near the bus station on Sheikh Ahmad Avenue, at half past seven. He lets himself in, straightens up and starts washing and slicing tomatoes, onions and red peppers. He sweeps in front of the store before his boss arrives, at around 10am, and opens up.



The 14-year-old rarely works with the meat, but he does just about everything else – delivering food to patrons, cleaning counters, running errands and generally keeping things moving, before heading home at around 9pm. He does this every day, or did until October, when his boss granted him every other Sunday off.

“This job is not so bad,” says Zain. The size of a much younger boy, he wears a black apron over a red-and-white checked shirt, blue jeans and plastic sandals. Over more than an hour of conversation, his expressions range from exhaustion, to concern, to concentration.

For his nearly 90 hours of weekly labour he earns 25 Turkish lira, or about \$0.12 an hour. Sweatshop workers in Bangladesh earn about two dollars a day. In China they make more than four. Zain takes home about a dollar and a half. “I asked my parents,” he says, “and they told me, according to our situation, the pay is good.”

Zain’s family of eight lives in a poorly lit flat in a crumbling apartment building in the city centre. Mangy dogs scrounge for scraps near the front door. Stained sheets and worn clothes hang from a rope stretched across a back alley, waving in the breeze. The family pays about \$270 a month for two small rooms.

Two of Zain’s sisters, aged nine and 11, hope to attend a school a local non-profit organisation is planning to open for refugees soon. His two older brothers, who are aged 17 and 20, do not attend school but work irregularly as porters at the bus station, bringing home a little more than Zain. Their 50-year-old father, a furniture maker back home, has no source of income.

“In Aleppo I had three furniture shops and I could support our family well, but here I cannot find work,” explains Abu Saleh, Zain’s father, as he sits in the shady courtyard of a 17th century mosque across the street from the butcher’s shop. “I’ve tried so many times to find a job but they tell me I’m too old. I am ready to work 24 hours a day if somebody would have me, so I wouldn’t be here cleaning the toilets of the mosque for nothing.”

Turkey has spent some \$4.5bn hosting Syrians, mostly in camps *The New York Times Magazine* dubbed “perfect” in terms of their accommodation, services and security. But the camps only hold some 250,000 refugees, and the remainder must fend for themselves.

In Kilis they’ve colonised almost every patch of grass or dirt: a family of four squeezed onto a tarp beside a mobile phone shop; small groups scattered across the grubby bus station lawn, huddled under blankets and sweaters, with suitcases, backpacks, shiny bags of salty snacks and the occasional toy nearby. Many wait for relatives coming across the border, an offer of housing or the possibility of a bus ride out.

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Children living in the camps receive free education, but only about one-in-four Syrian children outside the camps go to school. A few thousand attend normal Turkish schools, and some 70,000 attend temporary education centres set up by the education ministry. In a recent Brookings Institution report on refugee education in Turkey, a teacher at a Gaziantep high school for refugees said half of the boys in his class no longer attended because they had to provide an income for their families.

A few weeks after his family arrived in Kilis, Zain and his father were sitting at the mosque when the owner of Berat strolled up and said he could use some help, gesturing toward the boy. Desperate, Abu Saleh accepted the job for his youngest son without asking about the pay. “When we came here I wanted to take them to school, but I couldn’t because they had to support the family,” he says of his sons.

Abu Saleh wears dark-framed glasses but his face is drawn and unshaven, and his pinstriped navy blue suit, worn at the hems and splotted with dust and grime, hangs loosely on his gaunt frame. “If my boys don’t have education, they won’t have any careers,” he says. “But we don’t have another source of income.”

The Syrian Education Foundation, a non-profit based in Turkey, estimates that among the 500,000 school-age Syrians in Turkey, more than 300,000 do not attend school. The regional total, including Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, is likely double that. Zain, for one, doesn’t mind. “I hated getting up early, hated my pushy teachers, hated doing homework,” he says. “I don’t like this work either, but for now it’s alright.”



Fourteen-year-old Ahmed Zain, left, works in butcher shop and restaurant on a lively main street in Kilis, Turkey. For his nearly 90 hours of labour a week he earns about \$1.50 a day. His only friend, 14-year-old Ali, right, who is also from Aleppo in Syria, works at the kebab shop next door [David Lapeska]



## The view from Sheikh Ahmad Avenue

Child labour among Syrian refugees “has reached critical levels,” according to a recent United Nations report. Precise figures are hard to pin down, as most jobs go unreported and many children work intermittently, taking short-term jobs around harvest time, for instance. But a recent assessment by Unicef and Save the Children found that nearly half of all school-age refugees in the Jordan Valley were working.

Much of this work is on farms in rural areas or in the service sector in smaller towns – but child labourers can also be found in the cities. On Sheikh Ahmad Avenue alone, there is 14-year-old Ali at the doner restaurant next to Berat, and 11-year-old Bakri, surrounded by heavy machinery in the nearby sheet-metal shop, his face dusted with soot. He has been working there for a year, making \$9 for his 80-hour weeks. “I would prefer to go to school,” he admits.



At the bakery next door, 13-year-old Osama is caked in flour and unsteady on his feet. “Sometimes I get tired,” he says, “it depends on the day.”

Abdul, a doe-eyed, 10-year-old shoemaker’s assistant, has worked every day for months, making \$7 per week. He can’t recall where his family lived in Syria, and seems shell-shocked, answering questions with hesitation and uncertainty, as if disoriented.

Eight-year-old Yusuf Zeydan, stacking tomatoes at the produce market, works with three of his cousins. He doesn’t know how much he’s paid or the name of the city in which he lives, but, mustering a half smile, says: “I like working with my cousins.”

A 13-year-old girl works six days a week at a shoe store inside a nearby covered bazaar, and a 14-year-old girl makes \$22 a week at the nearby cosmetics shop, but refugee girls are less common in the workforce. Often, teenage girls are married off – mainly to local men – for a low bride price in the hope that the husband will provide for her. A Unicef study found nearly doubled rates of child marriage among refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, and social media has been rife with reports of Syrian refugee girls being forced into marriages in order to “protect their virtue”.

Across the region, many refugee girls and women avoid leaving home for fear of harassment by locals. Some are raped; some lured, desperate to feed their family, into sex work. Others are snatched and later sold. One UNHCR report uncovered an office in Libya where Arabs, mainly from the Gulf, bid on Syrian refugee women and girls, paying anywhere from \$50 to \$500. Of late, many Turkish men in the country’s border provinces have been paying for Syrian women to become their second or third wives, even though polygamy is illegal in Turkey.



The alternative to work or marriage is often crime. Ahmed Nassan, an anxious, sleepy-eyed 12-year-old with short, spiked hair, helped his father smuggle cigarettes across the Syrian border for months. But in October, he got a job at a mobile phone shop where he now works 10-hour days, making 35 lira (\$16) per week.

He credits his slightly higher than average earnings to his marketable skill – translating Arabic to Turkish for his boss and thus attracting refugee business. Nassan’s grandmother is Turkish, and he often spoke the language at home in Idlib, where his father worked as a policeman. He and his twin brother Mohamed, who also works at a mobile phone shop, are the oldest of eight children.

Nassan tells their story. “We were all at home eating breakfast,” he begins, his eyes widening slightly. “We heard the jet flying in the sky. Then we saw all the dust and heard the BOOM and the wall came down on us. It happened in the blink of an eye. We were all hurt but nobody died.”

Nassan, the most seriously injured, lifts his shirt to show dark markings on both sides of his stomach, where debris entered his abdomen, and a six-inch surgical scar running up his belly, where doctors went in to remove it. “When I got hit I didn’t feel anything,” he continues. “I just felt really warm here, in my stomach, so I laid on the ground.”



A study of Syrian refugee children in Turkey conducted by Bahcesehir University found that nearly half met the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, with symptoms such as intrusive memories, avoidance of potentially tense situations and sharp mood swings. About 60 percent showed signs of depression.

Most suffer the loss of a loved one, many witness horrific violence, but few receive treatment or counselling. Displacement and dramatic changes in lifestyle tend to increase insecurity, according to psychiatrists. A Save the Children survey found that more than 40 percent of Syrians aged 15 to 24 in Lebanon have contemplated suicide.

Nassan holds no grudge against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for dropping the bomb on his house. “He didn’t bomb us on purpose. He was trying to hit a school the rebels were using as a military base,” he explains. “But I’m angry at Bashar because he hasn’t killed [the word the 12-year-old actually uses is much coarser] the rebels yet. I support Bashar. Everyone supports Bashar.”

In fact, conversations with Syrians in Kilis and Gaziantep reveal little love for Assad. But while many hold fast to the dream of a free Syria, they also express frustration with the war, and with rebels of all stripes, from the moderate Free Syrian Army to more extreme outfits like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jubhat al-Nusra.





Eight-year-old Yusuf Zeydan, right, works at the produce market with three of his cousins – 17-year-old Ahmed Ali, 16-year-old Suraj Ali and 11-year-old Yaman. They are all from the Aleppo area of Syria [David Lapeska]



Nassan stayed in the hospital for about a month. When he got out, in February, his family moved to Turkey. A few months later his father returned to Syria, to help his own father in Aleppo. Now the twins are the breadwinners for their family of 10. “I would like to go to school, but there’s no school here,” says Nassan, who accepts that he needs to work for his family. “I will do this until I go back to Syria and can have a normal situation.”

## Parallel lives

Syrians cannot legally work in Turkey. But if an employer is going to break the law, children are much cheaper. The average wage for an adult Syrian refugee in Turkey’s border provinces is more than \$0.45 an hour – or nearly four times as much as the average child labourer.



“To Turkish employers they’re a great business opportunity – reducing the workload and often boosting profit,” says Hakan Acar, a sociologist and child labour analyst at Kocaeli University, in Izmit, some 80km southeast of Istanbul.

Turkey’s official 2012 figure for under-age labourers is 300,000, but that estimate ignores refugees and Turkish children working in the streets. The actual figure is likely more than half-a-million. The Syrian crisis has created an exceptional situation, but this seems a troubling total for a NATO-member state currently sitting on the governing board of the International Labour Organization (ILO), for which ending child labour is a fundamental principle.

ILO officials refused to comment on the rate of labour among child refugees in Turkey, but did point out a new initiative to reduce child labour among Turkish children along the Black Sea coast. Acar blames his country’s high rate of child labour on too few inspectors and employers who are rarely penalised for breaking the law.

In Turkey, it’s common to see a Turkish boy aged between 10 and 14 working an odd job – delivering glasses of tea around the neighbourhood, for instance, or helping out with the harvest. But they tend to work a few hours each afternoon, or a few weeks a year, rather than a dozen hours a day for months on end. Much like teenagers in Europe or the US, most work for a parent or other family member.



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In several shops along Sheikh Ahmad Avenue, a Syrian boy works alongside the son of the owner, a Turkish boy of similar age. And very few child refugee labourers in Kilis complain of abuse or mistreatment. “I have a good boss,” says Zain. “I don’t have a regular lunch break anymore. But if I want to go home for a little while during the day, it’s fine.”

Still, the contrast in work hours and pay, appearance, energy levels and future prospects could hardly be starker. “Syrian children are much more vulnerable – working longer and earning less money, and more commonly subject to violence and abuse,” says Acar, adding: “Turkish children have an informal protection system due to their families and friends.”

Turkey is a wealthy country compared to Syria. As poor, out-of-school Syrians grow up alongside Turks – who, for the most part, receive a decent education, wear nice clothes and look toward a bright future – tensions are bound to increase. “If they stay here for years, partially because of the income inequality, more young Syrians will be subject to abuse,” Acar explains. “Most likely the frustration and the number of juvenile offenders among refugees will increase.”

Tensions have already started bubbling over. In May, a group of Turks in Ankara threw stones at Syrian refugees and set fire to their apartment building, alleging that a Syrian had beaten a local. In July, more than 100 people took part in an anti-Syrian refugee march in Kayseri, burning a Syrian’s car in the process. And in September, porters in Sanliurfa, an ancient city about 200km from Kilis, attacked Syrian refugees who, like Zain’s brothers, had been working as porters for half the normal rate.

In their great numbers, Syrians have exposed Turkish xenophobia, especially along the border. From locals' perspectives, they take jobs and apartments, driving down wages and pushing up rents. They sleep on streets, beg and steal. In news reports, Turks have called their Syrian visitors "beggars," "looters" and "exploiters".

### **Unrecognised**

But a greater source of concern for Syrian refugees may be Ankara's legal dodge. Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, but maintains a restriction that awards refugee status only to Europeans. When Syrians started streaming across the border three years ago, Ankara registered the new arrivals not as refugees – which would entail providing universal education and steps toward resettlement – but as temporary guests, unable to accept work or take up residence and subject to deportation at the whim of the state.

That may soon change. In October, Turkey's labour ministry began an initiative to issue identification cards. The cards would not give Syrians refugee status but would provide limited permission to work. By next spring, the government is expected to decide how many cards will be issued, and in which provinces. "This could cut down on the child labour problem," says Acar. "But it could also increase tensions," he adds, envisioning more Syrians taking jobs from Turks.

Syrians across the region are already facing a tough winter. With more than 51 million people displaced around the globe, humanity is in the midst of its greatest refugee crisis since World War II. As a result, humanitarian budgets are under strain. UN programmes for Syria and its refugees have received from 30 to about 50 percent of their requested 2014 funding. Officials have warned of shortages of food, shelter and medicine for millions of Syrian refugees, which could lead to more children dropping out of school in order to find work. For Turkey, the demand could rise further still. Lebanon and Jordan have all but shut their borders to Syrian refugees, admitting to 'host-country fatigue'.

Humanitarian officials have called on wealthy western nations to do more. In 2012 alone, the US took in more than 10,000 Chinese asylum seekers and 3,000 Egyptians. Yet in the past three years it has accepted just over 200 Syrian refugees, most of who applied for resettlement before the conflict began. The US has, however, given more than \$3bn in humanitarian aid for the Syrian conflict, and a State Department official recently said the country plans to accept thousands of Syrian refugees in the next two years.



The European Union has given even more than the US, including a recently announced \$280m, part of which will go toward long-term response in Turkey. But with a population of more than five hundred million, Europe, which is practically next door to the conflict, has taken in just 125,000 Syrian refugees. That's a little more than three percent of the total. Take out the 70,000 welcomed by Germany, and the numbers seem even more glaring.

“When histories are written about the humanitarian cost of Syria’s civil war,” UN high commissioner for refugees Antonio Guterres recently wrote in *The Guardian*, “Europe’s response to the crisis of a generation might be summed up in a single phrase: never was so little done by so many for so few.”

### **The incalculable costs**

Within Syria, some three million children are not receiving education. Due to severely restricted access, there’s little the international community can do about that. But the more than half a million Syrian refugee children out of school is another story, particularly when the cost of educating a refugee child is \$12 a week, according to UNHCR, while the cost of not educating them is, well, potentially incalculable.





Ten-year-old Abdul is a shoemaker's apprentice and has been working in Mehmet's shop since July [David Lepeska]



In October 2013, the United Nations and an array of donors and international organisations launched the No Lost Generation initiative, aiming to increase education and psychological wellbeing among Syrian refugee children. The effort initially sought to raise \$1bn and received widespread support.

Yet the initiative has received just over \$300m of the \$880m pledged, and a one-year review found that progress had been made, in terms of schooling and youth activities, but that risks are increasing. “Adolescents are particularly vulnerable and underserved,” warned the executive summary, “with anger and frustration at their situations making them more susceptible to the lure of armed groups.”

Recent reports from the Overseas Development Institute, a British think tank, and the International Institute for Education expressed similar concerns. Studies of refugee youth in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan consistently report a sense of insecurity, a lack of hope, sadness and anxiety about the future.



The United Nations has documented several instances of refugee children, some as young as 12, being recruited by radical armed groups. UN officials view child recruitment as part of ISIL's core strategy, and activists in Kobane and Aleppo have reported seeing children under 14 fighting alongside ISIL fighters. Staff at Jordan's Za'atari camp have observed young refugees returning to Syria to join rebel groups, according to a 2013 report.

After chatting with two extended refugee families squatting in crumbling, abandoned stone houses in Gaziantep and living on very little income, Zakaria Zakaria, a Syrian activist and fixer, admitted: "If ISIL offered them money and a gun, they'd take it."

Among Abu Saleh's friends at the mosque is a Syrian refugee named Mohammed, a 30-something with slicked back hair and a neatly groomed mustache. Chatting over tea in the Orient Café, a stone's throw from the mosque, he explains that earlier this year he lived near Raqqa, close to an ISIL base.

"I spent time with them and they were okay," says Mohammed, sipping from a tulip-shaped glass. Sun streamed into the small, warm space as a Saudi news channel played live footage from a reporter embedded with the Kurds battling ISIL in Kobane, just across the border. "Not just because they're fighting Assad, because they're good guys. Sure, their leaders are corrupt and terrible. But the normal ISIL fighters, they're friendly, they're good people, good Muslims. ISIL is alright."

ISIL also has some support among locals. More than 1,000 Turks have joined the group, according to local news reports, including a 14-year-old from Ankara who had recently dropped out of school. ISIL reportedly operates cells and recruitment operations in a handful of cities along the Turkey border. Turkish police recently raided a safe house in Gaziantep, discovering suicide vests and explosives.



Such groups have repeatedly proven capable of exploiting the discontent of politically and economically marginalised youth. As a US-led coalition works to “degrade and destroy” ISIL, perhaps educating Syrian refugee children in Turkey should be viewed as another front in the battle.

A 2011 paper by Francisco Martin-Rayó for Harvard University’s Belfer Center focuses on keeping al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula from radicalising displaced Yemenis. But its lessons could apply elsewhere. “Access to a well-rounded education, even if of mediocre quality and even if the student is only able to attend for a few years,” Martin-Rayó writes, “is the most important factor in reducing radicalisation and terrorist recruitment from a population in a crisis situation, once their basic needs have been satisfied.”

Turkey has worked to educate more Syrian refugee children: cutting red tape to ease their registration in Turkish schools; joining forces with Unicef to train nearly 4,000 volunteer Syrian teachers and build 13 new schools, mostly outside the camps; and partnering with an educational foundation run by Qatar’s former first lady, Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser al Missned, to expand refugee education.

“There are serious efforts by the Turkey authorities to deal with this huge, complex issue, but the discussion is happening far from the public attention,” explains Batuhan Aydagul, the director of the Education Reform Initiative at Sabanci University, during an interview in his office in Istanbul’s Karakoy district.





Eleven-year-old Bakri is from Azzas in Syria. He works six days a week at a shop selling tin water heaters. “I prefer school to work,” he says. “In Syria, I would go to school, here I need to work.” [David Lapeska]



He urges the education ministry to bring advisers, analysts and the refugees themselves into the discussion to better address the challenges – such as infrastructure. Many schools in the provinces along the border are so full that they teach students in morning and afternoon shifts. If Turkey’s Syrian refugee children are to attend school within the next couple years, the majority will do so at night. “It can’t be during the day because our schools are full,” says Aydagul.

Long after the sun has set and Berat’s last customer has left, Zain mops the floor and wipes the counters. On nights when they’re not too tired, he and Ali, from the doner shop next door, take a few minutes to act like kids. “After we finish work, sometimes we ride our bicycles around,” says Zain. “Then we have to go home to sleep and come back to work.”



He misses Aleppo – his house, his neighbourhood, his old friends. “I just wish this war was over, so I could go back home,” he says. “What I miss most are my uncles and aunts, my entire family. Every weekend we used to drive out to the country to relax and have a barbecue. Now some of them are gone, killed by the barrel bombs.”

Zain’s father prefers to look forward, to Germany or the Netherlands, where he hopes to take his family and find work. “I’d do anything to be able to work on furniture again – I’ve been doing it for 40 years,” he says. He lowers his head and runs his fingers along his receding hairline. Then he raises it again. “I would like to be able to give my kids something better, but if there’s no school, what can I do?” he asks, pausing. “I just have faith in Allah, whatever he gives me, we’ll be okay.”

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