



Defense for Children  
International  
**MENA** Regional Desk

# Overview of Child Rights Situation in Arab Countries





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Research and writing support was provided by Defense for Children International – Palestine’s Brad Parker, international advocacy officer, Mona Patel, consultant, and Olivia Watson, advocacy officer. DCIP’s Ivan Karakashian, advocacy unit coordinator, and Priscilla Doolittle Wathington, consulting editor, edited and reviewed the report. Sukaina Khalawi, regional coordinator of the Middle East and North Africa Desk at DCI, also reviewed the report.

Cover Photo:

The children of an impoverished Iraqi family reportedly living on five dollars a day and living in structures made up of scrap metal play outside their home in the holy Iraqi city of Najaf as Muslims around the world celebrate Eid al-Fitr marking the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan on July 19, 2015. AFP PHOTO / HAIDAR HAMDANI

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Children across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are frequently deprived of the basic rights afforded to them in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international law.

This is particularly alarming and reprehensible for children within the juvenile justice system, regardless of whether they are in conflict with the law.

Across the region, laws relating to children are outdated, and enforcement of children's rights is too often weak or nonexistent. Many countries lack a comprehensive juvenile justice system that can appropriately respect and handle children's rights. Shockingly, governments in some countries are simply unable or unwilling to adequately protect children.

Across the MENA region, human rights organizations are campaigning for change as they provide and strengthen key services. However, these organizations face their own difficulties, handicapped by restrictions on freedom of expression, and physical attacks on activists.

DCI-Palestine's MENA project, launched in 2011, is improving the situation for children across the region by supporting organizations that work for children's rights. By working closely with the League of Arab States and creating a strong regional network, we promote basic protections for children, and we seek to develop child-friendly justice systems based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and international law.



# CONTENTS

Foreword	6
DCI-Egypt	8
DCI-Iraq	13
DCI-Libya	17
DCI-Lebanon	21
DCI-Mauritania	27
DCI-Morocco	31
DCI-Palestine	35
DCI-SUDAN	40
DCI-Tunisia	45
DCI-Yemen	49

# Foreword

**By Sukaina Khalawi**

In 2011, the people of the Arab world rose up in popular protest against the autocratic rule of their leaders. For some, the civil uprisings ushered a transition to democracy. Others, however, found themselves swept up by the sudden political instability and plunged into armed conflict.

According to the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict, "2014 saw unprecedented challenges for the protection of tens of millions of children growing up in countries affected by conflict." Of the 23 conflict situations covered, seven involved Arab countries. Children in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen fell victim to such grave violations as killing and maiming, recruitment and use, sexual violence, and abduction.

Meanwhile, the influx of refugees and asylum-seekers escaping atrocities outpaced the rate of response in host countries, leaving refugee children vulnerable on multiple fronts.

Even the Arab countries that emerged from revolution are still grappling with social norms that view early child marriage, female genital mutilation, child labor, and violence toward children, among other violations of children's rights, as acceptable.

Defense for Children International (DCI) felt the urgency to grow the movement across the Middle East and North Africa to address the high protection risks that exist for children. In 2011, DCI's International Executive Council gave the Palestine section the mandate to establish DCI sections in the Arab world.

Defense for Children International Palestine partnered with leading local, independent civil society organizations from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen, each eventually becoming a member of the DCI movement in their own right. While DCI made significant progress toward welcoming a Sudanese partner to the fold, the relationship dissolved late in 2014 as the organization struggled to sustain its operations amid political turmoil.

All nine of these organizations have since sought to engage the Arab League specifically, as well as the United Nations and other international bodies, to bolster

protection mechanisms for children in the Arab world.

In 2004, the Council of the Arab League adopted the amended Arab Charter on Human Rights, reaffirming its commitment to international human rights law. Since then, 13 member states have ratified the convention. However, without a compliance mechanism and with nominal input from human rights organizations, the potential for positive change and intervention has remained negligible.

Here, the DCI movement found its focus. The nine sections want the Arab League to set a clear child rights agenda. One that revises the Arab Charter on Human Rights to ensure children's rights are in line with international standards, reforms the Arab Human Rights Committee and the Arab Commission on Human Rights to strengthen their mandate, and allows greater interaction and consultation with civil society organizations.

A major role for the DCI sections lies in drafting a comprehensive guideline on child friendly justice and advocating for the Arab League member states to adopt the document. The guideline deals with laws and their application that affect children in conflict or in contact with the law and children victims of violence. The document offers best practices to law enforcement personnel, judges, lawyers, prosecutors, protection and probation officers, parliamentarians, and other stakeholders that take into account the child's well-being during all legal procedures.

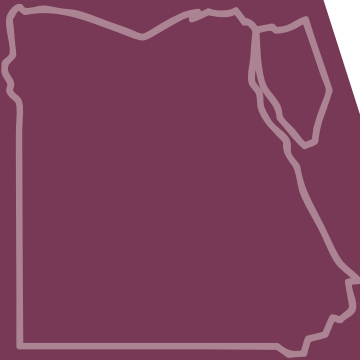
As the nine sections ramp up their advocacy efforts, they wrote the summaries in this publication to offer a glimpse into the situation of children in their respective countries. To provide a measure of where children's rights in the Arab world stood at the end of 2014, and where they need to be. To spur action.

*Sukaina Khalawi is regional coordinator of the Middle East and North Africa Desk at Defense for Children International.*



## DCI-Egypt

The Egyptian Foundation for Advancement of Childhood Conditions, founded in 2000, promotes children's welfare, advocates against their exploitation and abuse, and advances protections for those in conflict with the law. EFACC provides free legal aid to children in distress.



# EGYPT

Since 2011, Egypt has undergone tremendous upheaval affecting all aspects of civil society. In the period before the revolution, Egypt had been making gains in education, access to vaccines and sanitized water. Child labor, violence against girls, educational gaps across gender and socioeconomic conditions had persisted as areas of concern.

Egypt's amended  
constitution entitles  
children under age

**18**

to free vaccination  
and health care

Political and social turmoil between 2011 and 2014 resulted in diverted attention from preexisting child rights issues. Egyptians lived through periods of provisional government, Mohammad Morsi's presidency, and the election of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. During and following this period of high instability, the delivery of humanitarian services also suffered. Additionally, the conflict in Syria created an influx of child refugees in need of food, shelter, schooling and medical care in Egypt.

Prior to the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the country had made significant progress in the area of children's rights following the modification of Law 126 in 2008. The amendment shifted the legal framework in which children in conflict with the law were assessed, viewing them as at risk and offering them rehabilitation rather than meting out harsh punishment. The outbreak of the revolution, however, prevented the full application of this law, and its impact remained unrealized.

In 2013, civil society organizations

participated in drafting the new Egyptian constitution. This version followed an earlier draft in 2012 by ousted former President Mohammad Morsi, which faced strong opposition from local and international rights organizations. The revised constitutional draft included a significant modification concerning children's rights: Article 80, which entitles every child under age 18 to free vaccination, health care, familial or state-provided care, food, and shelter. The amendment came into effect in January 2014 with the rest of Egypt's constitution. Hany Helal, secretary-general of the Egyptian Coalition on Children's Rights, stated that Article 80 represented a "quantum leap forward" for Egyptian children and protected legislative gains made in 2008, local media reported.

**15 million**

Egyptian children were  
targeted for polio vaccination  
in October 2014

Other positive developments in 2013 included updated initiatives and programs supported by UNICEF, the Egyptian Ministry of Health, and community partners. In July 2013, UNICEF launched a new country

# 1.4 million

children are  
currently not enrolled  
in any school

program with the goal of building capacity and strengthening service delivery mechanisms in long-term protection systems, giving particular attention to the situation of girls. Egypt's Ministry of Health likewise outlined steps to ramp up pre-natal care and community-based health programs in their "National Maternal, Neonatal, and Child Health (MNCH) Acceleration Plan." Additionally, in October 2014, 15 million children were targeted for polio vaccination in Egypt, in response to Syria's polio outbreak.

Egypt has made steady gains in closing the gender gap in both primary and secondary education, reaching nearly parallel enrollment and retention rates. However, further work remains necessary to improve the quality of education, increase participation in early childhood programs, and overcome geographic disparities. Overall, Egypt achieved a net enrollment of 91 percent in primary school and 81 percent in secondary school in the 2013-2014 academic year. Although these encouraging numbers nearly approach universal education, concerns remain

that Egyptian schools may not have the capacity to serve the remaining 1.4 million children currently not enrolled in any school. Often these children are in impoverished rural settings or have disabilities, as stated in UNICEF's 2013 annual report. These unreached children are also more likely to engage in child labor, a group making up somewhere between 3 and 15 percent of Egypt's child population. Furthermore, schoolchildren lack a quality education, with 90 percent of schools failing the state's standards in 2012.

Child arrests, detention and imprisonment continue to be a protection risk for children in Egypt. In the second half of 2013, UNICEF estimated that 400 children wound up arrested in connection with political turmoil. In December 2014, the Nadim Center for the Psychological Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and Torture, an Egyptian human rights group, reported that Central Security Forces (CSF) held approximately 600 children in a detention camp in northeast Egypt. According to *Mada Masr*, a Cairo-based news website,

# 400

children wound up arrested  
in connection with political  
turmoil in the second half  
of 2013

# 120,000

Syrian child refugees face significant hardships that include detention and deportation

one 14-year-old detainee from the CSF camp described incidents of ill-treatment, torture and abuse that he and other child detainees endured. On the legislative front, Law 136, issued in October 2014, broadened the reach of Egypt's military courts to include public spaces and could carry serious implications for children. Human Rights Watch noted that Egyptian military courts do not differentiate between children and adults in treatment.

Girls in custody are at particular risk of experiencing some form of physical or sexual violence, as described in Amnesty International's recently released report, "'Circles of Hell': Domestic, Public and State Violence Against Women in Egypt." According to the report, the risk of exposure to abuses is "acute upon arrest, during police interrogations and during the initial period of detention" for both political and criminal detainees. Detention conditions in some facilities were also characterized as "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in themselves."

The same report also found that outside of detention, Egyptian girls are at high risk of becoming victims of sexual and physical violence in both the domestic and public spheres. Over a two-year period ending in June 2014, Egyptian human rights organizations documented 500 gang rape and sexual assault cases, most of which were never criminally investigated. Despite the frequency of these types of attacks at large public gatherings, the report states, "the authorities' response has been tokenistic, and has consistently failed to take necessary measures to prevent, investigate and punish them." In the domestic sphere, female genital mutilation is still common. Most recent figures from UNICEF's State of the World's Children report show that this form of violence affects 16.5 percent of girls and 91 percent of all women. It also reveals that 54 percent of the population expresses support for the practice.

Syrian child refugees, a population of approximately 120,000, are also facing significant challenges. Among these, detention, imprisonment, and deportation figure prominently. UNICEF reports that in July 2014, "at least seven Syrian children were detained and deported without charges. Hundreds of Syrian refugees trying to irregularly migrate to Europe were also arrested. Cases that could be recorded show that about 220 Syrian refugee children were detained

in overcrowded police stations without charge for weeks, of which 125 were deported.” Those who succeeded in registering as refugees are now frequently subsisting in households with insufficient food and shelter. According to the 2015-2016 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for Egypt, 306 of 340 households reported adopting negative coping strategies in the preceding 30 days. Nine percent of them resorted to sending children to work, and 8 percent sent children to beg. One of 3RP’s planned measures for the coming year is to increasingly link child protection services to the education sector.

In the absence of a unified national plan for the protection of children’s rights and limited coordination between governmental and non-governmental organizations, Defense for Children International Egypt has played a critical role in addressing the complete legal needs of both child victims of violence and children in conflict with the law. Its team provides legal representation in the courts and monitors conditions of prisons and

detention centers. They document cases of child rights violations and fatalities, including incidents of institutional, political, and domestic violence, child exploitation, neglect, and torture. They also advocate for long-term legal reforms and commitments that meet the needs of children, both critical if Egyptian children are to access their rights free from exploitation, discrimination, and abuse.

## DCI-Iraq

South Youth Organization, founded in 2005, raises awareness of human rights and works to achieve greater protections for them. SYO documents and exposes grave violations against children, specifically focusing on abuse of women and girls, sectarian violence, and discrimination issues.



# IRAQ

Children in Iraq remain gravely endangered by external and internal armed conflict, the Syrian refugee crisis, and ongoing political instability. The escalating armed conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has placed more children in peril. High protection risks exist for children in multiple aspects of their lives, especially in the areas of child recruitment, child labor, education, sexual violence, and shelter.

Heightened instability paved the way for ISIL, also known as ISIS, a terror group with a stronghold in war-torn Syria, to sweep across northern and western Iraq in 2014. In June of that year, ISIL forces seized Mosul, the second-largest Iraqi city, establishing their headquarters there. In areas under ISIL's control, multiple human rights organizations have reported on the prevalence of child recruitment, including the use of children as human shields, and child labor. Defense for Children International's affiliated organization in Iraq, South Youth Organization, reported that in June 2014, ISIL used children as human shields in Mosul, forcing them to sit next to windows in vehicles to prevent enemy troops from firing on their fighters. A Human Rights Watch report on the use of children by armed groups in Syria found that ISIL, in particular, was systematically targeting children for recruitment. Numerous videos posted on social media

**653**

schools in the Dohuk region of Iraqi Kurdistan serve as shelters for IDPs

platforms by ISIL, itself, confirm these findings, showing children engaged in military training, carrying weapons, and shooting at prisoners.

For girls living under ISIL's rule in Iraq, the greatest protection risks are sexual violence and forced marriage. A 2014 report published by Amnesty International highlighted the severe dangers facing girls belonging to ethnic minority groups, most notably the Yazidis. The report found that torture of Yazidi girls, including rape, sexual slavery, and other forms of sexual violence, were widespread. Other alarming abuses included girls being offered as "gifts" or "sold" to ISIL fighters and their supporters. Many were forced to convert to Islam. A Human Rights Watch report, published in 2014, also documented hundreds of cases of abductions, rape, and violence perpetrated by ISIL against girls. Both reports concluded that the sale of young girls as sexual slaves amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The presence of ISIL in Iraq has also heavily impacted the education sector in several ways. First, many families fleeing ISIL violence are seeking shelter in school buildings, making them unusable for students. A September 2014 Human Rights Watch news release stated that 653 schools in the Dohuk region of Iraqi Kurdistan and approximately 2,000 schools nationally were being used as shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs). Additionally, schools have become targets in fatal attacks, according to UNICEF, decreasing the existence of safe child-friendly spaces.

**2,000**

schools nationally  
were used as shelters for  
IDPs

In ISIL-controlled areas, numerous media reports have documented the extent to which ISIL has taken over the administration and curriculum of schools. An article in *The Week*, published in October 2014, noted that all schools in ISIL-held land must conform to ISIL's mandatory curriculum, which bans music, social studies, history, arts, sports, philosophy, and psychology. In this way, media reports suggest, ISIL has access to a generation of children, whom it hopes to turn into lifelong supporters. According to South Youth Organization, teachers faced threats of torture or death if they refused to open schools and teach the ISIL curriculum.

The conflict in Syria exacerbated an already complex humanitarian situation in Iraq. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, a steadily increasing number of refugees fleeing the violence in Syria have sought safety in Iraq. According to a February 2015 report published by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), the number of Syrian refugees in Iraq approached 250,000 at the end of

2014, and nearly half were children. The report states that the majority of refugees live in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq: 40 percent of these refugees are residing in nine refugee camps, while the remainder live alongside host communities.

Thousands of Iraqis who fled to Syria between 2003 and 2011 have returned to their country, joining the estimated one million Iraqis who were already internally displaced following decades of instability and conflict in the country. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, a monitoring group, the number of IDPs in Iraq stands at an estimated 2.1 million, after a further wave of Iraqis fled their homes in 2014, seeking refuge from ISIL.

Conditions for refugees and IDPs are harsh, both for those residing in refugee camps and in or alongside host communities. The humanitarian organization, Refugees International, found in its 2014 research that refugee camps were overcrowded, resulting in strained facilities and resources, and an increased risk of communicable diseases. South Youth

The projected population of  
concern will exceed

**2 million**

by the end of 2015



Organization estimates that 1,500 children from fleeing families have died from hunger, disease, or military operations since the rise of ISIL. In urban areas, families are finding it necessary to move repeatedly in search of employment and affordable housing. The overall result for children is a highly unstable environment that interrupts their education and takes a toll on their mental and physical wellbeing, according to South Youth Organization.

The situation throughout Iraq has contributed to harsh economic conditions and may be increasing the risk of child labor. Between 2006 and 2011, the rate of child labor had shown a downward trend, dropping from 11 to 6 percent, according to UNICEF. However, reduced school access combined with increased physical and financial insecurity frequently have a compounding effect on the prevalence of child labor, as parents begin to rely on their children to subsidize the family income. This is particularly true in areas where businesses have closed down as a result of instability and violence. In many cases, children must work to provide for their siblings after the death of one or both parents. Government efforts to address the existence of child labor that were in place before the rise of ISIL have also stumbled because of the conflict.

In addition to the need for greater

**1,500**

children from fleeing families have died from hunger, disease, or military operations

national security and stability, UNHCR noted that underfunding presented a serious obstacle to delivering services to persons with assessed needs. In their 2014 end of year report, UNHCR stated that the World Food Program suspended the school feeding program for Syrian refugees in September due to lack of funds. Similarly, the UN agency did not carry out routine food distributions in refugee camps in June and August of that year. With a projected population of concern exceeding 2 million by the end of 2015, funding will be a critical factor in increasing protections for children in Iraq.

## DCI-Libya

The Libyan Association for Children's Rights, founded in 2000, promotes children's rights through monitoring and documenting abuses, raising government and public awareness of protection gaps, and advocacy efforts aimed at bringing existing legislation in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

# LIBYA

Prior to the 2011 revolution, the outlook for Libya's children was optimistic. Libya's economic resources, majority urban population living well above the poverty line, and low population growth rate, increased the likelihood of positive child health, safety, and educational outcomes. However, in the wake of a now four-year civil war, many of Libya's children face multiple human rights challenges. Children under the age of 14 represent 31.2 percent of Libya's population of approximately six million, a third of whom have been directly affected by the humanitarian crisis, according to the World Food Program (WFP). In fact, up to 600,000 children are vulnerable to violence, malnutrition, and shortfalls in basic health care and education.

Two institutional voids, both tied to Libya's ongoing civil war, have exasperated the current situation of Libya's children. The first of these arises from the near-absence of a functioning government. The second is due to large-scale withdrawals of international humanitarian organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and United Nations agencies, which has created broad protection gaps. Citing security concerns and following the closure of Tripoli's airport, many organizations stopped or suspended operations. Others, including the UN, evacuated staff to external locations but are attempting to ensure continuity of services via local groups. However, insufficient funding combined with widespread insecurity have restricted the flow of goods and services. For example, the U.S.-based International Medical Corps cites "increases in food and fuel prices" among the factors inhibiting their relief efforts, particularly along Libya's northern border. Evacuations of trained personnel have also hampered emergency humanitarian relief efforts.

The withdrawal of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, in July 2014 carried strong implications for Libya's population of internally displaced persons (IDPs), which continued to swell due to ongoing internal armed conflict. In December 2014, the number of IDPs in Libya was at least 400,000, according to data published

by the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC). According to the monitoring group, obtaining accurate information has been a significant challenge "given lack of access and ongoing pervasive chaos."

Intense fighting in the eastern coastal city of Benghazi in May 2014 displaced an estimated 90,000 people, based on IDMC research. The violence spread westward to Libya's largest city, Tripoli, with at least 269,000 people forced to flee, and to the south, where a further 18,500 suffered displacement. According to Human Rights Watch, "those displaced continued to seek safety and shelter in makeshift camps and private housing in many areas."

The armed uprising in 2011 that ousted Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi has resulted in an estimated 56,000 IDPs living in situations of protracted displacement, according to IDMC. The majority of them had fled from the town of Tawergha, just south of the coastal city of Misrata, and sought refuge in Benghazi and Tripoli. At the end of 2014, "approximately

Violence in Libya's largest city, Tripoli, displaced at least

**269,000**  
people

9,600 Tawerghan IDPs from five camps in Benghazi were again displaced and continued to find shelter in schools, rented homes or other public facilities,” IDMC reported.

School closures have been another side effect of the country’s civil war, which may carry workforce implications for future governments. More than 1.2 million students, according to UN figures, missed a year of school at the outset of the ongoing civil war, and there is no reliable data on current rates of school enrollment. Since public schools reopened, they have faced overcrowding, as schools in the hardest-hit areas continue to serve as shelters for displaced families. The UN children’s agency, UNICEF, deemed other schools unsafe due to the presence of unexploded mines or damage caused by hostilities. The December 2014 WFP report showed that children in the eastern part of the country were most impacted by school closures, with the majority of those surveyed lacking access to a functioning school.

This interruption in educational opportunities, combined with the persistent threat of violence, has caused an uptick in psychosocial problems among children, including post-traumatic stress and poor school performance. One teacher, cited by the Libyan group, Tawergha Children’s Rights Association, said children asked for toy guns during play time and

acted out traumatic scenes they and their families had witnessed.

Amid the exposure to trauma and violence, support services for children are collapsing, mirroring the overall state of the country’s health sector. Here, especially, Libyan humanitarian groups point to the withdrawal of international aid agencies. Some of these organizations previously provided vital, primary health-care services to the most vulnerable, including children. Currently, Libya’s Red Crescent Society is among the few organizations still providing those services.

Another vulnerable child population is that of asylum seekers and refugees attempting to reach Europe – some, as unaccompanied minors – and finding unsafe conditions in Libya along their route of escape. For every 10 Libyan IDPs, the International Organization for Migration estimates that there is one registered refugee from another country attempting to transit through Libya and across the Mediterranean. Some are fleeing fighting in Syria while others seek economic opportunities absent in their home countries in

More than  
**1.2 million**  
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year of school

sub-Saharan Africa. According to recent migrants interviewed in the UK daily *The Telegraph*, “hundreds of unaccompanied children and teenagers” attempt to cross to Europe each year from other countries. One migrant from Senegal, who survived an attack by Libyan militias that killed his brother, told the paper, “Everyone in Libya is armed now.” Further endangerment is possible as neighboring and western states are reportedly considering interventions to prevent Libya from becoming an illegal route of passage for persons and weapons.

Despite withdrawals, aid agencies are trying to ensure continuity of their programs by collaborating with local organizations, which still have access to dangerous areas. For example, in early 2015, UNICEF announced that it had teamed with the Taher Azzawi Charity Organization, a Tripoli-based aid group, to offer child-friendly spaces to 800 displaced families, among other services. Likewise, the International Medical Corps (IMC), in coordination with local partners, has sent two shipments of hygiene supplies and food to 3,400 IDPs. Meanwhile, the UN Support Mission in Libya, or UNSMIL, has maintained its chief mandate to coordinate international assistance to the country. However, the bulk of that support has been diverted into stopgap interventions instead of capacity-building and other longer-term

An estimated  
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measures.

The consensus among aid workers is that the welfare of Libya’s children ultimately hinges on the willingness of the country’s political factions and armed groups to forge peace. Many international humanitarian groups have expressed their commitment to restart services once minimum-security bars have been restored. Since July 2014, UNSMIL has “reaffirm[ed] the necessity of political dialogue as a means to achieving national consensus on the priorities for building state institutions grounded in the rule of law.”



## DCI-Lebanon

Connect Children Now, founded in 2014, works to protect children from violence, abuse and exploitation, with a focus on child refugees and workers. CCN provides psycho-social support and offers recreational activities for these vulnerable groups to mitigate the effects of trauma and overcome challenges.

# LEBANON

The protracted Syrian crisis continues to make significant numbers of children inside Lebanon vulnerable to rights violations. According to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), an estimated 1 million Syrian refugees and 50,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) reside in Lebanon, making it host to the largest number of Syrian refugees. As instability in the region and inside Lebanon continues, prospects for positive change are limited, and the number of impacted children is likely to remain high or even increase. Moreover, the severity of difficulties Syrian refugee children face in their daily lives appears to be increasing. As levels of distress rise and hopes for an improvement in their situation decrease, more families are turning to negative coping mechanisms, such as early marriages and child labor. At the same time, Lebanese host communities are showing signs of strain as economic competition increases and the availability of affordable housing decreases.

As new Syrian refugees continue to arrive in Lebanon, and displacement becomes protracted for others, municipal and humanitarian assistance programs are struggling to meet children's basic needs. UNICEF's 2013 annual report stated that only one-quarter of all out-of-school Syrian children were able to access formal or informal education that

UNICEF reported a  
**49**  
percent budget deficit for  
its water, sanitation, and  
hygiene services

year. A UNHCR survey found that 77 percent of Syrian refugee children sampled were not registered at birth, putting them at risk for statelessness. In the same year, UNICEF reported a 49 percent budget deficit for its water, sanitation, and hygiene services, leaving many without a source of clean water and exposed to water-borne diseases. In addition to population size and growth rate, the broad geographic dispersal of refugees has presented a large obstacle to service delivery. According to the 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan for

Lebanon (SRRP), Syrian refugees have settled in 1,500 localities, making it difficult and costly to disseminate services for children in need.

Lebanon's pre-existing housing shortage has become a significant challenge for Syrian refugees. As displacement continues, and housing prices increase, more Syrians have been forced to move into informal housing. In addition, the annual equivalent of US\$200 registration fee required for all non-nationals residing in Lebanon over the age of 15, "may push more refugee households to downgrade the quality of their shelter in order to meet this expense," according to a recent report by UNHCR and UN-HABITAT. Poor housing conditions have in turn negatively affected the health and safety of children and created new environmental problems.

For Syrians able to secure rental apartments, overcrowding is a primary concern. According to the Syrian Regional Response Plan for

Syrian refugees  
have settled in  
**1,500**  
localities

# 170,000

Lebanese nationals  
fell below the poverty line in  
the wake of the Syrian crisis

Lebanon, half of all rental housing inhabited by Syrian refugees is overcrowded, with multiple families sharing tight quarters. When combined with high levels of parental unemployment and distress, overcrowding has caused severe protection risks for children, who have become more vulnerable to abuse, including sexual abuse, at home. Child sexual abuse is uniquely complex to address as children and family members rarely report it, making it difficult to identify and provide services for child victims. While the number of affected children is unknown, paraprofessionals have reported numerous cases of concern. In some cases, children report incidents themselves or discuss sexual harassment and abuse in general terms without disclosing personal experiences.

According to UNICEF's data, the close of 2013 saw 130,000 Syrian registered refugees living in 446 informal tented settlements (ITS). The majority of ITS are privately leased properties consisting of

between four and 24 structures, according to a 2014 joint report by UNHCR and UN-HABITAT. ITS pose multiple risks to children, offering little protection from the elements, no or minimal access to sanitation services, and endangerment from open fires used for warmth. UNICEF further reported, "Poor sanitary conditions were exacerbated in the winter months as overcrowding and dampness led to increased diarrheal diseases, acute respiratory infections and skin diseases."

In addition to ITS, some refugees have settled into public and private buildings that have been temporarily converted into collective shelters with the assistance of external funders. Although only representing 2 percent of Syrian refugees' housing arrangements, collective shelters are serving as a viable alternative to the creation of new refugee camps, which the Lebanese government has strictly prohibited. However, more long-term solutions are necessary to improve living conditions, provide basic water and waste management services to these and other informal housing arrangements, and to prevent the contamination of Lebanon's soil and water.



Competition for basic needs has led to tensions between Lebanese host and Syrian refugee communities, which, in turn, has negatively affected children. By UNICEF's estimates, 170,000 Lebanese nationals fell below the poverty line in the wake of the Syrian crisis. "Curfews imposed on refugees in local villages, recent evictions of refugees from apartments and land used for informal settlements, are testament to growing tensions between Lebanese and refugee communities in some areas," according to the 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan for Lebanon. A recent Save the Children study found that 90 percent of Lebanese nationals

Approximately  
**450,000**  
Palestinian refugees live in  
Lebanon

surveyed believed Syrian refugees to be a "symbolic and economic threat," and supported curfews and other restrictions being placed on them. According to focused group discussions, a more troubling finding was the indication of "a serious threat

of Lebanese to Syrian violence, especially in Sahel Akkar," one of the poorest rural areas in the north.

Diminished social cohesion has restricted Syrian children's movements, resulting in reduced societal and educational participation, as well as exposure to discrimination and violence. A 2013 survey conducted by the World Food Program found that approximately 10 percent of Syrian refugee households had experienced a form of harassment in the previous three months. Fears over increased reports of violence at school and on the streets have motivated many parents to keep their children at home. During UNHCR field research across Jordan and Lebanon, published in 2013, 29 percent of children surveyed stated that they left their homes once a week or less. Syrian adolescents in particular report feeling that peers from the host community hold highly negative views of them.

Among refugees from Syria, Palestinian refugees are a specifically vulnerable group. As of April 2014, UNWRA reported 53,070 PRS seeking shelter in Lebanon, bringing the overall number of Palestinian refugees in the country up to approximately 450,000. Lebanon's 12 established

camps for Palestinian refugees were overcrowded prior to the Syrian crisis, causing prices to surge with the influx of new Palestinian refugees. High levels of unemployment and poverty in the camps, due to discrimination and restrictions in the labor market, and poor municipal structural upkeep have produced insecure living conditions for children. Significantly, an unknown number of PRS are unregistered and, therefore, unable to access health and educational services provided by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). This is a critical risk factor for PRS children, who, unlike other Syrian refugees, are ineligible for Lebanese public services. Furthermore, some PRS are being denied entry at Lebanon's border or are later deported, resulting in separation of families, and restrictions on visa renewals that consequently hinder birth registration.

Child labor, including the worst forms of child labor as defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), is a concern for all children in Lebanon. Syrian refugee children, especially those who are separated from or without parental supervision, are most at risk. In 2013, UNICEF estimated that one in 10 Syrian refugee children engaged in some form of child labor. A study commissioned

by UNICEF, ILO, and Save the Children International identified four leading factors for this phenomenon: "social exclusion, vulnerability of households, the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, as well as organized crime and exploitation of children." Of those surveyed, most were male, and were either illiterate or had never attended school. Syrian nationals and non-nationals, including PRS, made up 73 percent of the sample. The most prevalent forms of work were begging and street vending with average earnings of US\$12 per

**One in 10**

Syrian refugee children  
engage in some form  
of child labor

day. The study also found that 6 percent of street-based children had experience sexual or physical abuse in their workplace and nearly half believed there was no one to whom they could report violations. The findings from this study were a first step toward a national action plan to end the worst forms of child labor by 2016, following Lebanon's pledge in November 2013.

As Lebanon looks forward to 2015, a number of security issues remain unsolved. The increased presence of armed groups and militants, incidents of suicide bombings and other violent clashes pose a direct threat to all children's safety. More children fleeing Syria continue to arrive at Lebanon's border even as existing refugee and host communities show signs of heavy strain. With a growing number of families entering poverty and inhabiting inadequate shelters, more work is needed to close human rights gaps for children.

## DCI-Mauritania

The Mauritanian Association for the Health of Mother and Child (AMSME), founded in 1999, protects and advances the rights of women and children in the areas of health, education, and social care. AMSME focuses on reducing maternal and child mortality rates, combating HIV and AIDS, and exposing violence against women and children.



# MAURITANIA

Located in West Africa, Mauritania is home to 3.8 million people, of which nearly half are children. Though the State has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and adopted legislation that protects children's rights, Mauritania's children continue to face significant challenges to their development and security. In particular, forced child labor, harmful traditional practices, and a juvenile justice system that fails to meet international standards are primary concerns.

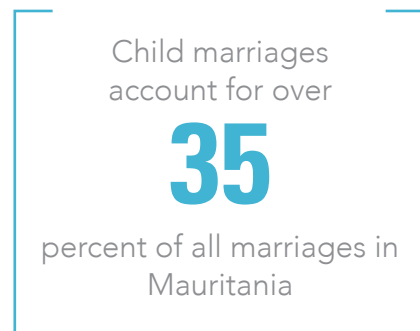
Child labor remains prevalent in Mauritania. Households retain young children, often girls, as unpaid servants in urban areas. Both human rights groups and the Committee on the Rights of the Child have also expressed concern over the lack of protection for “talibes,” or boys studying the Quran, forced to beg on the streets for their “marabouts,” or religious teachers. The government has failed to take adequate steps to eliminate this practice as well as other forms of compulsory labor, including agricultural and manual labor, in exchange for food, shelter, and medicine.

The government has implemented a protection mechanism through the Center for the Protection and Social Integration of Children in Difficult Situations to assist child victims of slavery and forced labor. However, human rights organizations have observed the center lacks funding and is not fully functional. Additionally, the government’s denial of the widespread practice of slavery in Mauritania has made it difficult to document the exact number of children living in slave-like conditions.

Troubling accounts of other traditions that violate the rights of the child have been particularly harmful to young girls in Mauritania, such as female genital mutilation (FGM). Any act or attempt to cause harm to a girl’s reproductive organs is

punishable under Mauritania’s penal code. Despite a decline in the practice, FGM is still prevalent, affecting 54 percent of girls, based on the most recent data in UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children report. The procedure is usually performed when the child is one-month-old. However, according to UNICEF and other women’s rights experts, public opinion on the matter appears to be shifting away from support. This positive change is partially due to a government program implemented in 2013 that enforced laws against FGM as well as to educational initiatives and community-based efforts to increase public awareness of the serious health risks involved.

Two other harmful practices for young girls are early marriage and forced feeding, also called “leblouh” or “gavage.” Citing United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) data from 2012, Equality Now noted child marriages account for over 35 percent of all marriages in Mauritania. A 2014 study by UNICEF found a particularly high age gap between spouses in



Mauritania, where 60 percent of married or cohabiting young girls were 10 years younger than their partners. Forced feeding often accompanies child marriage in Mauritania because it can accelerate puberty and present the appearance of family wealth. According to a recent Thomson Reuters Foundation article, “women’s rights organizations say they are



increasingly seeing “chemical gavage” where girls take drugs including growth hormones, contraceptives, and corticoids.” These drugs carry significant health risks, including renal and heart failure. Furthermore, early marriages are associated with increased risks of forced labor as well as physical and sexual abuse.

Defense for Children International’s affiliated organization, the Mauritanian Association for the Health of Mother and Child (AMSME), based in Mauritania’s capital city, Nouakchott, uncovered widespread sexual assault of girls under the age of 18. Of 159 cases of sexual violence documented by AMSME in Nouakchott last year, 137 involved children. Since 2008,

AMSME has operated a center in the city’s southern suburb of El-Mina that aids victims of sexual assault with a wide range of services. The first of its kind in Mauritania, the center, built in partnership with Save the Children Spain and the Spanish Cooperation, cooperates with the police, hospitals, and health centers. It also maintains a database of information and statistics on sexual abuse in the city.

Protecting young girls from sexual abuse has proven difficult as many in Mauritanian society still consider the topic taboo. Legislation concerning sexual assault remains poorly defined, and women and girls who press charges often face criminal sanctions. In many legal and government documents, sexual abuse is categorized only as “injuries” or “domestic violence.” Victims who report the crime risk facing jail time due to laws prohibiting sexual acts between unmarried persons. Given obstacles to reporting, AMSME surmises that the actual number of victims far surpasses public records.

Children in conflict with the law face significant protection gaps in Mauritania’s juvenile justice system. The system has been widely criticized for its low minimum age of criminal responsibility, which permits the detention of minors as young as seven, and also for detaining children in facilities that fail to meet international standards.

Deteriorating conditions of juvenile detention centers, such as the facility at Beila, have forced children to be transferred to the Nouakchott Central Prison, where they are detained with more violent offenders. In its 2014 report, the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH), a government institution that advises the president and legislature on issues related to human rights, reported seeing minors under the age of 15 detained at the Nouakchott prison. The report noted one of the prisoners also appeared too young to be in a prison at all.

The government has reportedly initiated programs to improve the prison system and its poorly constructed facilities, including building a new prison in Nbelka, in the southwest region of Mauritania. However, progress has been slow and not specific to improving detention conditions for children. International human rights groups have continued to denounce the overcrowded prison facilities, poor security conditions and extended pretrial detention periods. Although the law prohibits the detention of minors for more than

six months while awaiting trial, many children remain in custody for much longer.

Despite legislative prohibitions against torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, the CNDH and international human rights groups have continued to document such abuses. In 2013, an Amnesty International delegation spoke with 11 children who had endured torture in police stations, including the facility designated for juvenile offenders at a police post in Nouakchott, called the Brigade de Jeunes. Speaking with Amnesty International, a 16-year-old prisoner described officers beating him with batons while he hung upside-down, with his hands cuffed in a painful stress position. By Amnesty International's account, torture is of primary concern in police custody facilities.

Though many news outlets and human rights groups have exposed troubling human rights violations for children in Mauritania, recent data and coverage have been more limited. The government's refusal to adequately address specific concerns, such as slavery, sexual assault, and child marriage, complicates efforts to accurately document cases, assess needs, and eradicate these harmful practices.

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## DCI-Morocco

Bayti, founded in 1995, works on protecting children, with a focus on those living on the streets, from all forms of violence. It provides them with rehabilitation services and psycho-social support, and assists their reintegration into the family home, school, and community.



# MOROCCO

Children make up around 30 percent of the nearly 33 million strong population of Morocco, a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament that has been under the rule of King Mohammed VI since 1999. The country has been undergoing a process of economic and social liberalization since King Mohammed came to power.



In March 2011, the speed of reforms gathered pace in the midst of the Arab Spring that saw widespread protests sweep the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In response to increasingly strident calls for political reform from the Moroccan people, King Mohammed introduced a wide range of legislative changes. These included constitutional amendments and a more independent judiciary, as well as holding early parliamentary elections in November 2011. Aside from a brief period of political unrest in 2013 and despite economic pressures, Morocco is currently one of the more politically stable countries in the MENA region. As a result, Moroccan children benefit from safer conditions than their peers in some neighboring countries.

Child labor affects roughly

8

percent of children  
between the ages  
of 5 and 14

Morocco has steadily reduced its poverty rate over the past decade, though high levels of poverty remain, with rural and outer city areas in particular missing out on economic growth. Indeed, poverty levels and the discrepancy in wealth between marginalized areas and urban centers

84

percent of rural communities  
consider early marriage, even  
when forced, acceptable

remain two over-arching challenges facing Moroccan society. Both serve as root causes of many of the hardships experienced by Moroccan children.

One strong example of the link between poverty, rural communities, and children's rights violations is the phenomenon of early marriage. In 2014, UNICEF found that 16 percent of girls married before the age of 18. A report by YTTO, a Moroccan organization that provides shelter and rehabilitation for women victims of violence, found that 84 percent of rural communities consider early marriage, even when forced, acceptable. According to the campaigning group, Girls Not Brides, rural households frequently viewed it as a way of alleviating the financial burden that an additional child in the house places on a family. The subject of early marriage, though widely campaigned upon by both local and international women and children's rights organizations, remains a current problem.

In addition to early marriage, three other persistent and widespread trends stand out, often peaking among the rural poor. First, the

More than  
**30,000**  
children live on the  
streets in Morocco's urban  
centers

continuing presence of child labor in Moroccan society. Second, the high number of children dropping out of school before the end of their compulsory education. Third, the phenomenon of street children – those who spend all, or the majority, of their time unsupervised on Morocco's streets.

Child labor affects roughly 8 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 14, according to UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2015 report. Human Rights Watch has claimed that Morocco has one of the highest levels of child labor across the MENA region. Though the government enacted legislation designed to curb child labor in 2001, including raising the minimum age for employment from 12 to 15 years old, child labor remains common.

Save the Children found the prevalence of child labor varied widely by location, age, and gender, with 73 percent of those working located in rural areas. According to the organization, "boys experience forced labor as apprentices in the

artisan and construction industries and in mechanic shops." Its research also shows that "girls as young as 6 or 7 years old from rural communities are recruited to work as child maids in cities, and often experience conditions of forced labor, such as non-payment of wages, threats, and physical or sexual abuse." A study in 2010 by the National Coalition to Ban the Recruitment of Child Maids found 66,000 girls under age 15 working in homes.

Another troubling trend is Morocco's high dropout rate in primary and secondary schools. Though media reports in 2014 found that the situation had improved since 1999, the U.S. government agency USAID found that only 53 percent of children enrolled in school will continue to high school. School dropout rates share a close link to child labor. Children are most likely to leave school before the age of 15 in rural areas, where accessing education may be challenging and incentives to contribute to household finances high. An affiliated member of Defense for Children International, Bayti, found that enrollment rates

Only  
**53**  
percent of children  
continue to high school

for girls in secondary schools in rural areas are 10 percent lower than for their urban peers (37.6 percent versus 47.2 percent). This situation is similar for boys, who are likely to leave school prematurely in order to seek employment and do so primarily in poorer, rural areas.

The third and most pressing negative trend in children's rights involves the consistently high number of children living on the streets in Morocco's urban centers. According to a study undertaken in 2012 by sociologist Chakib Jasous, their number surpassed 30,000, with more than 1,000 homeless in Casablanca alone. Local journalists and civil society organizations confirmed this trend. A 2006 UNICEF report noted that most street children were boys as they were more likely to flee abusive situations. Further causes included health issues of a parent or caregiver and internal migration from rural to urban areas by children in their early teens seeking work.

Bayti's 2011 report on the situation for children in Morocco found that in addition to being denied an education and a stable childhood, children living on the streets faced a variety of dangers. These included physical

**66,000**

girls, some as young as 6, from rural communities are recruited to work as child maids in cities

and sexual abuse, exposure to drugs, and criminal activities. It also reported that although a number of social care associations provided support to children experiencing homelessness, there was still a dearth of adequate institutional support provided by the state. This gap exists despite progress in legislation to combat children's rights violations in recent years.

Children's rights violations also occur as a result of cultural and social norms. For example, the prevalence of corporal punishment, which is widespread both in schools and in the home, is largely due to social beliefs that view physical punishment as an appropriate disciplinary measure. Societal attitudes too often determine the exposure of select groups of children to rights abuses. Most at risk are migrant children, those who suffer from disabilities, children belonging to ethnic or religious minorities, and orphans.

## DCI-Palestine

Defense for Children International Palestine, founded in 1991, investigates, documents and exposes grave human rights violations against children. It advocates at the international and national levels to advance access to justice and protections for children. DCIP also provides direct legal aid to children in distress.



# PALESTINE

Children represent 46.2 percent of the 4.68 million Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. Instability and violence define much of their lives. Not only do Palestinian children struggle with Israel's occupation policies and practices, but they also face a harsh domestic juvenile justice system and inadequate protections. Since 2000, Israeli forces and extremists have killed more than 1,991 Palestinian children, including 551 in 2014 alone, according to Defense for Children International Palestine (DCIP) research. Displacement, access to education and healthcare, and psychological trauma remain significant areas of concern particularly in the wake of Israel's 2014 assault on Gaza.

Children represent 46.2 percent of the  
**4.68 million**  
Palestinians living in the  
OPT

The security of Palestinian children significantly deteriorated in 2014. DCIP verified that 535 children died – nearly 68 percent of them age 12 and below – as a direct result of Israeli attacks during the summer's Gaza conflict. A further 3,306 children sustained injuries, including more than 1,000 who suffered permanent disability, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). At least 1,500 children became orphans because of Israel's 50-day military operation, OCHA reported. The UN estimated that 373,000 children required psychosocial support. For many children older than eight years, this was the sixth time they endured a major Israeli military operation in Gaza.

In the aftermath of Israel's summer offensive, 100,000 Palestinians, including many children, remain internally displaced. Most families with destroyed or partially damaged homes have been unable to rebuild their homes because they lack funds and Israel's siege of Gaza restricts the import of construction materials. With massive destruction to civilian

infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, many children in Gaza face limits on access to education and healthcare. According to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), "90 percent of the 252 UNRWA schools in Gaza are run on a double shift basis, and some even on triple shift, effectively reducing the school day to four hours."

Palestinian children in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, also endured heightened levels of violence in 2014, as Israeli soldiers and police used excessive force to quash protests. Twelve of them died at

**535**  
children died as a direct result of Israeli attacks during the 2014 Gaza hostilities

the hands of Israeli forces, all except one with live ammunition, according to DCIP research. DCIP found no evidence that any of the children killed in the West Bank posed a direct threat to Israeli troops or settlers. Only one incident resulted in both an investigation and indictment. OCHA estimated a further 1,188 children injured in the West Bank from Israeli live fire and crowd control weapons, including rubber-coated metal bullets,

tear gas canisters, water cannons, and sound grenades, during the year.

Palestinian children in the West Bank, like adults, also face arrest, prosecution, and detention under an Israeli military court system that denies them basic rights. Since 1967, Israel has operated two separate legal systems in the same territory: Israeli settlers live under civilian law whereas Palestinians are subject to military law. Israel applies civilian law to Palestinian

**1,188**

children injured in the West Bank from Israeli live fire and crowd control weapons

children in East Jerusalem. According to DCIP, Israel is the only country in the world that prosecutes between 500 and 700 children in military courts each year.

In 2014, Israel held an average of 188 Palestinian children in custody each month, according to data provided by the Israel Prison Service. DCIP received affidavits from 107 West Bank children detained during the year that showed three-quarters of them endured some form of physical violence following arrest. Israeli interrogators also used position abuse, threats, and solitary

confinement to coerce confessions from some children. In 93 percent of these cases, Israeli authorities deprived children of legal counsel and improperly informed them of their rights. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* obtained a military court report in 2011 that showed a 99.7 percent conviction rate for Palestinian defendants.

A growing number of Palestinian children and their families live in villages and towns hemmed in by expanding and often violent Israeli settler communities. Since Israel occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, in 1967, it has established some 125 Jewish-only settlements that house 515,000 Israelis. The international community considers them illegal. Israel, however, claims religious and historical rights to the territory. Stationed throughout the West Bank, Israeli soldiers, police, and private security firms protect settler populations at the expense of Palestinian civilians. In this hyper-militarized environment, Palestinian children face disproportionate physical violence, restricted access to education, and psychological trauma. OCHA estimates that more than 730 settler attacks have occurred since 2013.

Violations of children's rights also occur under Palestinian jurisdiction. In particular, those in conflict with the law report abuse during arrest,

interrogation, and pretrial detention. A crucial source of this problem is the absence of a unified Palestinian juvenile law. Instead, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank relies on a Jordanian law that dates back to 1954 and the Hamas government in Gaza applies British law enacted in 1937. These legislations predate modern international standards for safeguarding children's rights, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). However, in recent years, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has taken significant steps to advance legal protections for children.

At the end of 2012, amendments to Palestinian Child Law No. 7 came into effect, which raised the age of criminal responsibility from 9 to 12, among other changes. In 2014, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas signed the CRC and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Moreover, a national commission completed a draft law on juvenile justice in 2012, with a focus on preventive measures and alternatives to incarceration. However, the process of passing the legislation has been slow despite its potential to remedy the failings of the current juvenile justice system.

In the meantime, 2,457 Palestinian children in the West Bank found themselves in conflict with the law in 2014. According to the General Police Directorate, 1,891 of them

wound up in detention centers after their arrest. Some reported threats, beatings, and neglect by Palestinian security forces. Defense for Children International Palestine provided free legal aid to 81 children in 2014 and documented 22 other cases. Around 40 percent of them said they endured some form of physical violence at the hands of non-specialized police and security services. None of these children arrested by the juvenile police – a unit established in 2012 to handle juvenile cases – reported ill-treatment. On average, the 81 children represented by DCIP, spent 18 days in pretrial detention. Other human rights organizations have reported longer periods. Lack of facilities left juveniles in adult prisons or police stations though in separate cells.

The number of children exposed to violence in the community and at home remains alarming. A Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) survey in 2011 showed that 22 percent of children living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, between the ages of 12 and 17, endured violence at schools. A further 51 percent suffered

Around  
**73,000**  
children are part of the  
labor force

some form of domestic abuse. According to PCBS, rising poverty across the Occupied Palestinian Territory forced around 73,000 children into the labor force, where many faced multiple forms of exploitation.

Statistics on Palestinian child labor do not include children, some as young as 11, working up to 12 hours a day in Israeli agricultural settlements. Employers pay them in cash, which leaves no trace of them working in settlements and denies them official status, health insurance, or rights as employees. This invisible workforce results in serious protection risks for children. They can suffer from injuries and chronic pain due to long hours, exposure to dangerous chemicals, and the harsh physical nature of the work. They are also more vulnerable to exploitation, fearful that complaining may jeopardize their source of income and safety. Both Palestinian and Israeli law prohibit employment under the age of 15 and hazardous work under the age of 18. However, Palestinian law enforcement has no jurisdiction in Israeli settlements and a recent Human Rights Watch report finds

that “Israel has turned a blind eye to violations of Israeli labor laws vis-à-vis Palestinian workers in the settlement agricultural sector.”

While Palestine has taken important steps to ensure the safety and well-being of Palestinian children, including ratifying the CRC and the Optional Protocol, protection gaps will persist without significant reforms to domestic laws. Moreover, the lives of Palestinian children will remain endangered until a political solution ends Israel’s prolonged military occupation.

**2,457**

Palestinian children in the West Bank found themselves in conflict with the law in 2014





# SUDAN

Sudan has been mired in civil conflict for the past several decades. While a 2005 agreement sought to end hostilities, the recent armed conflict between government and rebel forces in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile states have resulted in persistent reports of grave violations of children's rights. High levels of internal displacement, poverty, and severe economic strain on the government, in part due to ongoing armed conflict, are obstacles to protecting children's rights and to implementing existing international and national legal standards.

Children comprise 48 percent of Sudan's total population of 38 million people, including 5.7 million children under 5 years old, according to UNICEF. While rural and poor children are the country's most vulnerable, all children face significant obstacles accessing basic rights and protections. They often suffer from the effects of armed conflict, limited access to education and resources, food shortages, and climate change, according to a 2011 joint report by UNICEF and the National Council for Child Welfare.

In 1990, Sudan was one of the first states to recognize and pledge to protect children's rights by signing and ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Sudan has since signed the CRC's two Optional Protocols, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The Government of Sudan established the National Council for Child Welfare as well as several other child-specific government agencies and institutions,

Children comprise  
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people

Sudanese armed forces  
raped  
**200**  
women and girls in  
Darfur on October 30, 2014

and it enacted the Child Act in 2010 to increase protections for children. Local human rights organizations have deemed these developments to be significant accomplishments. However, the CRC committee has found that children living in Sudan have seen little improvement in accessing rights and protections as Sudanese authorities have failed to comprehensively implement laws intended to protect children.

Child rights abuses are reportedly widespread in areas where armed conflict is ongoing, including the killing and maiming of children, and child recruitment and use by armed forces and groups, according to reports issued by the UN Secretary-General. Currently, six parties, including the Sudanese armed forces, are included in the annex to the UN Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict for the grave violation of recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. A number of children associated with armed forces and groups have participated in child disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration

programs in Sudan. However, there remains persistent reports of child recruitment in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile.

Despite difficulties in accessing conflict areas, recurrent reports of other grave violations against children during armed conflict persist, including attacks on civilians, sexual violence against children, and attacks against schools. A recent Amnesty International report found that on October 30, 2014, Sudanese armed forces in Darfur carried out attacks against civilians, including children, involving the mass rape of around 200 women and girls. Due to a limited monitoring capacity and the stigma associated with being a victim of sexual violence, the UN Secretary-General's 2014 annual report on children and armed conflict noted the likely underreporting in incidents of sexual violence against children in Sudan. A recent report issued by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack found that during 2013, Sudanese armed forces' airstrikes and shelling reportedly damaged or destroyed several schools in North Darfur and South Kordofan.

Violence against children is prevalent throughout Sudan and occurs in both private and public settings. Corporal punishment is not expressly prohibited in the Child Act of 2010 and, therefore, lawful in the home, schools, and penal and juvenile detention institutions,

according to the advocacy group Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children. While the Child Act of 2010 does prohibit "cruel penalties," the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child found that the law does not explicitly prohibit corporal punishment. Local child rights organizations report that due to the lack of clarity in the law, violence against children in schools manifests in both physical and verbal abuse. While the Sudanese law provides for tuition-free basic education through grade eight, students reportedly had to pay fees to attend. In at least some instances, local child rights organizations have reported that children unable to pay these fees are subject to physical violence. Furthermore, physical violence is reported by local child rights organizations to be prevalent among students themselves, where older children bully and abuse younger ones.

In the public realm, Sudanese children are experiencing an increased risk of violence in the context of protests and demonstrations. Since 2011, Sudanese armed forces and police have increasingly used unnecessary or excessive force against protesters, resulting in child fatalities and injuries during demonstrations. Amnesty International found that in September 2013, police at a protest outside government offices in Nyala fatally shot two children with live

ammunition. In July 2012, Sudanese police and security forces killed 10 children when they reportedly fired live ammunition into a mass public protest, according to the African Center for Justice and Peace Studies. With the Sudanese government's current restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly, as well as police and security forces' repeated excessive use of force to disperse protests, children at or near demonstrations remain vulnerable to violence.

Sudanese children in conflict with the law encounter a juvenile justice system that fails to meet international juvenile justice standards. The Child Act of 2010 established a juvenile justice system in Sudan. However, local child rights organizations and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have noted that the inadequate allocation of resources remains an obstacle to full compliance with international juvenile justice standards. In particular, the system lacks child-friendly facilities and personnel. Regarding substantive fair trial rights, local child rights organizations have raised concerns over reports of physical violence during arrest, and law enforcement officials conducting interrogations without the presence of a parent or guardian. Furthermore, while the Child Act of 2010 abolished the death penalty for children, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child notes that Article 36 of the 2005

Interim National Constitution allows the death penalty for persons below age 18 in cases of retribution.

In addition to these abuses, Sudanese girls face additional challenges with high national rates of gender-based violence as well as early marriage. Sudan has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the Arab region, according to a 2013 report by the Population Reference Bureau. The most recent data collected by UNICEF shows that about seven percent of girls are married by the time they reach age 15, and around 33 percent of girls are married by the time they reach 18 years old. Additionally, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) remains widespread with 37 percent of girls having undergone some form of FGM/C, according to UNICEF data.

While the law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, child labor is not explicitly prohibited in the Child Act of 2010 nor is the age for child labor defined in Sudan's labor law. Child laborers and street children are often exposed to physical violence, as their families either do not support them or

**37**

percent of girls having  
undergone some form of  
FGM/C

are unable to protect them, according to local child rights organizations. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child had raised concerns that “child labor is widespread in the [Sudan], with many children employed in factories, as domestic servants, in the agricultural sector and in the informal economy.” The committee added, “That, as legislation does not limit the industries, enterprises or types of work in which children may be employed, children are not adequately protected from engagement in hazardous work.”

## DCI-Tunisia

The Tunisian Association for Children's Rights, founded in 1997, raises awareness of children's rights in the areas of health, education, and participation. TACR also provides mobile health care units and offers recreational activities to children living in rural areas and refugee camps.



# TUNISIA

In December 2010, the people of Tunisia rose up in popular protest against the autocratic rule of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, triggering his fall from power and the country's ongoing transition to democracy. The Tunisian revolution marked the beginning of the Arab Spring, the wave of civil uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region from 2011 onward.

Since then, Tunisia has been consolidating democracy by establishing a constituent assembly, adopting a new constitution, and organizing fully democratic legislative and presidential elections. It successfully completed its second round of presidential elections in November 2014, further strengthening the country's fledgling democratic status.

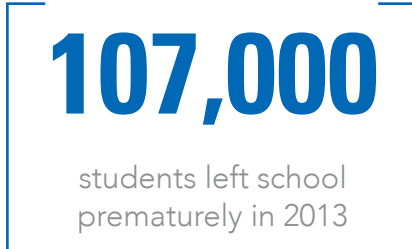
Prior to the revolution, President Ben Ali had been in power for 23 years. During this time, fundamental freedoms were restricted, with the judiciary unable to function independently and many human rights organizations prevented from operating. Despite this poor record, however, Ben Ali's administration did ratify most international conventions and treaties that affected children's rights, starting in 1991 with the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Tunisian government also made significant legislative progress in protecting and promoting children's rights.

In practical terms, however, Tunisian children face challenges that have yet to be resolved in the wake of the revolution. Prevalent both before and after the revolution are social norms that view violence toward children as an acceptable disciplinary measure, with physical punishment widely used due to a lack of understanding of alternative disciplinary measures.

According to UNICEF's 2013 annual report on Tunisia, as many as a third of children aged between 2 and 14 are exposed to physical violence.

The revolution itself generated new opportunities and obstacles for children. According to local campaigners, human rights organizations now have greater freedom to operate in Tunisian society and to advocate for the protection of children's rights. However, a World Bank report released in 2012 found that the sudden political instability exacerbated poverty and unemployment across Tunisia, particularly in rural regions. This placed a strain on families, reducing their capacity to support their children and fueling three key, interlinked issues that cause significant concern for children living in Tunisia, both prior to and since 2011. Firstly, a moderate to high school dropout rate; secondly, the presence of child labor; and thirdly, child homelessness.

In its report on Tunisia, UNICEF noted the high number of children dropping out of school before the end of their compulsory education, set at 16 years.



**107,000**  
students left school  
prematurely in 2013

According to Defense for Children International Tunisia, the proportion of children leaving school before the age of 16 has been on an upward curve over the past two decades. A report by the local human rights group, Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, found that 107,000 students left school prematurely in 2013, which represented a marginal drop from the all-time high of 112,000 the previous year. The trend has persisted in spite of high levels of investment in education prior to 2010, and educational reforms in the wake of the revolution.

This high dropout rate is concerning both for its impact on a child's long-term ability to access opportunities afforded to those who complete their education – such as greater employment prospects and higher living standards – as well as the immediate increased risk of child exploitation. DCI-Tunisia's data shows that boys are predominantly affected, making up two-thirds of all those who end their education prematurely. Although there is a need for more information, the existing data suggests that dropping out of school is closely linked to child labor. A U.S. Department of Labor study examining child labor in Tunisia, published in 2012, found that lax government enforcement on existing regulations meant that there were continuing opportunities for children to find

work, in spite of legislation introduced to combat child labor. Solutions to both of these problems must take seriously the root cause of poverty, as indicated by higher rates of child labor and lower rates of secondary school retention in poorer regions – a link that several human rights groups, including Save the Children, have documented.

While the persistent presence of child labor is due in large part to poverty, especially as it affects rural regions, DCI-Tunisia has documented some cases in which children reported entering the labor market in part due to disillusionment with the education system. This issue may arise from a lack of individualized student guidance and interventions within schools, as well as inadequate systems of incentives and preventative measures to promote high school completion.

Accurate statistics on child labor remain difficult to obtain, as children usually engage in informal employment. However, research undertaken by Save the Children in 2011 indicated that boys working in rural areas find work primarily within the agricultural sector, while urban dwelling children typically work in the manufacturing industry. In both cases, work conditions expose children to potentially harmful chemicals, injury from dangerous machinery or tools, or physical harm from performing



repetitive motions and carrying heavy loads.

For girls, child labor frequently comes in the form of domestic servitude, which places them in private, unregulated work settings, and leaves them vulnerable to abuse. One children's rights group, SOS Children's Villages, put the number of girls commencing domestic work before the age of 14 at approximately 30 percent. Outside of the paid domestic child laborer market, many families still expect girls to take on a significant share of household duties within their own family homes. The burden of these responsibilities can make obtaining an education difficult or even impossible.

The third trend drawing attention in recent years is the increase in the number of children living or spending most of their time on the streets. Some local journalists and human rights activists have described the problem as preexisting, adding that it has only become more visible in the wake of the revolution. Media outlets, which were restricted and monitored during the rule of President Ben Ali, are now enjoying greater freedoms,

enabling journalists to examine and publicly criticize state policies. As a result, journalists working locally on children's rights have suggested that the issue of street children is increasingly being recognized as a challenge for Tunisia. Recent data on this phenomenon remains limited, but a 2008 UNICEF report showed that street children live mostly in densely populated urban centers, where they are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and coming into conflict with law. Crucially, 86 percent of children interviewed that were living on the street at the time said they had dropped out of school very early.

With the future of the region uncertain, Tunisia's children may have more challenges to face beyond existing, long-term trends. Instability, whether caused by domestic or regional political turbulence, could both exacerbate the issues and present new challenges.

**30**

percent of girls commence domestic work before the age of 14

## DCI-Yemen

Democracy School, founded in 2001, exposes violations against children, provides legal and social aid to children in distress, and raises government and public awareness of children's rights. Democracy School operates the Children's Parliament, which allows child participants to directly impact policies that affect them.



# YEMEN

By most available measures, the situation of Yemen's children is urgent. They represent roughly half of a population that has endured decades of civil war, poverty, and political turmoil. Severe water and food shortages have led to alarming rates of stunting and wasting among children. As impoverished families exposed to violent unrest struggle to survive, they have been willing to accept – and at times, even pursue – negative coping strategies for their children. Government forces and rebel groups have taken advantage of the dire situation to recruit children as fighters in the country's ongoing armed conflict.

The UN Security Council through its children and armed conflict agenda has been monitoring grave violations against children, including child recruitment, during hostilities in Yemen. Beginning in 2011, the UN Secretary-General listed two armed groups in the annex of his annual report on children and armed conflict for their recruitment and use of children. In 2012, the UN Secretary-General also added Yemen's government forces to the list. Former Defense Ministry official, Ahmad Obaid, said in March 2014 that Yemen's Defense Ministry employed approximately 20,000 child soldiers between the ages of 14 and 17, the English-language weekly *Yemen Times* reported.

"Since September 2014, when the Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, took control of Yemen's capital, Sanaa, they have increasingly used children as scouts, guards, runners, and fighters, with some children being wounded and killed," according to Human Rights Watch. UNICEF estimates that children account for 30 percent of all fighters in armed groups. Defense for Children International's affiliated organization in Yemen, Democracy School, found that in the southern governorate of Aden, child soldiers were almost evenly split between pro-government forces and rebel groups. In May 2014, the Yemeni government signed a UN action plan aimed

at ending and preventing child recruitment. The plan requires "disseminating military orders prohibiting the recruitment and use of children below age 18," updating legislation in accordance with international standards, and

Yemen's Defense Ministry employed approximately

**20,000**

child soldiers

facilitating the UN's ability to monitor compliance. Since the collapse of the Yemeni government in January 2015, there has been no progress toward this goal. Substantial steps will be required to end formal and informal recruitment practices as well as to reintegrate former child soldiers into schools and other child-friendly spaces.

Many factors contribute to the prevalence of child recruitment, not least of which is Yemen's water crisis and the resulting economic implications. UNICEF's 2013 annual report stated that water coverage had dropped in the last decade from an already low rate of 66 percent in 1990 to 55 percent in 2013. With one of the largest water shortages in the world, Sanaa, home to 2.6 million people, is set to be the first capital city to run

out of water, according to the *Yemen Times*. The same article explains how agriculture absorbs 90 percent of the country's water, even though it only accounts for 6 percent of Yemen's GDP. One reason for these diminutive returns is that an estimated 50 percent of all agricultural water usage goes toward cultivating water-intensive *qat*, a mild plant-based stimulant. A *Middle East Report* article published in 2010 pointed out that the national *qat* economy is profitable, with "15 percent of the population directly or indirectly benefiting from its production, transport and trade."

The compounded effect of low rainfall and poor water management has placed an undue strain on families. With cities like Taiz receiving water every 45 days and other cities receiving none at all, family members,

Sanaa, home to  
**2.6 million**  
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capital city to run out of  
water

including children, often must walk long distances to obtain water from neighboring village wells. As rapid depletion of groundwater aquifers continues and tensions sprout over negative strategies, such as illegal siphoning and unmonitored

well drilling, water competition is becoming a site of conflict. According to a January 2015 *Newsweek* report, approximately 4,000 Yemenis die each year due to disputes over land irrigation.

Food shortages are likewise a concern for Yemen's children, and may escalate further if the country's water supply remains destabilized. Recent data from UNICEF's the State Of The World's Children indicates crisis-level malnutrition, with 32 percent of children born underweight, 47 percent experiencing stunted growth, and 13 percent wasting in the first five years of their lives. UNICEF's 2013 annual report states, "Only 5 percent of children between 6-23 months consume a minimum acceptable diet in terms of quality and quantity and exclusive breastfeeding is amongst the lowest in the world at 19 percent." Moreover, malnourishment makes children more vulnerable to a host of diseases, as World Food Program spokesperson Elizabeth Byrs stated to Voice of America in a 2014 article.

In addition to child recruitment, children in Yemen remain endangered by other forms of violence, including U.S. military actions, mines and unexploded ordnances, and disciplinary measures. A confirmed U.S. drone strike in January 2015 killed one child, Mohammad, who was 13 years old. *The Intercept*, an online magazine, detailed the story of this

Yemeni boy who “lived in constant fear of the ‘death machines’ in the sky” after his brother and father died from drone strikes in 2011. Mohammad’s death brought the total number of child deaths from confirmed U.S. drone strikes up to eight, according to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. In February of 2015, UNICEF reported five cases of children between the ages of 4 and 8 who were maimed by a grenade explosion. Between 2012 and 2013, UNICEF confirmed 114 child casualties due to unexploded ordnance and mines. This number is set to rise dramatically as hostilities in Yemen intensify. The UN agency has stressed the need for the continuation of both parental education and de-mining programs. Meanwhile, disciplinary violence remains a challenge requiring systematic data collection and capacity development in the area of child protection.

Widespread school closures, a consequence of destroyed infrastructure and deepening insecurity, have resulted in further

**4,000**

Yemenis die each year due to disputes over land irrigation

More than  
**1,800**

schools across the country are closed

hardships on children. According to UNICEF, more than “1,800 schools across the country are closed, affecting nearly 1.5 million children.” The loss of child-friendly spaces in schools has created an opening for armed groups to recruit children. Fighters offering food, water, and sometimes *qat* in exchange for conscription have found families who are willing to register their children.

Despite current challenges, the Democracy School, with the support of UNICEF, Save the Children, and the European Union, works to give a voice to Yemen’s children. One of their promising projects is the Children’s Parliament, which brings together youth, human rights representatives, and government officials. The initiative, which launched in 2000, gave Yemeni youth a platform to push for high-level commitment aimed at improving conditions in key areas like education and health. In 2013, the Children’s Parliament had the opportunity to voice their concerns directly to the country’s prime minister. In recent years, members have focused on stopping child recruitment through legislation that severely

penalizes individuals utilizing child soldiers.

Before the outbreak of recent violence in Yemen, the country ranked 154 out of 187 on the human development index and occupied the lowest rank on the gender index in 2013. In light of current heightened instability and mounting death tolls, Yemen's children are now among the most endangered regionally.



# Overview of Child Rights Situation in Arab Countries

[www.dci-palestine.org](http://www.dci-palestine.org)

