When I Picture My Future, I See Nothing

Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Turkey
If a person is sick, they can get treatment and get better. If a child doesn’t go to school, it will create big problems in the future—they will end up on the streets, or go back to Syria to die fighting, or be radicalized into extremists, or die in the ocean trying to reach Europe.

Shaza Barakat, director of a Syrian temporary education center in Istanbul and mother to a son who died aged 16 in 2012, when he returned to Syria to fight with opposition forces after finding no educational opportunities in Turkey.

Class pictures of Sara, 10, who was the only Syrian student in her class at her local public school in the town of Baghata in western Turkey. Sara enjoys attending school so much that when Human Rights Watch met her in June 2015, she had already packed her bags for the new school year, just days after the start of her summer vacation. Photographs © 2015 Stephanie Gee/Human Rights Watch
This report is the first of a three-part series addressing the urgent issue of access to education for Syrian refugee schoolchildren in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. The series will examine the various barriers preventing Syrian children from accessing education and calls for host governments, international donors, and implementing partners to mitigate their impact in order to prevent a lost generation of Syrian children.

Prior to the conflict, the primary school enrollment rate in Syria was 99 percent and lower secondary school enrollment was 89 percent, with high gender parity. Today, nearly 3 million Syrian children inside and outside the country are out of school, according to UNICEF estimates—demolishing Syria’s achievement of near universal education before the war. In Turkey’s 25 government-run refugee camps, approximately 90 percent of school-aged Syrian children regularly attend school. However, these children represent just 15 percent of the Syrian refugee school-aged population in

Abdulmajid, 11, (left) stands next to his brother Mohammed, 9, in a street in the port city of Mersin, southern Turkey. In February 2015, they fled Syria with their family and now work full-time in a tailor’s shop. They have not attended school since 2012.

Nine-year-old Mohammed has not attended school since 2012, when an armed group took over his school in the Aleppo countryside. His family, which fled to the Turkish seaside city of Mersin in early 2015, now lives in a small, unfurnished apartment and sleeps on the floor.

Mohammed, who would now be in third grade, misses going to school. “I was one of the best in my class, and I really liked learning how to read. But now we don’t even have any books or anything that I can use to study on my own.” He works eleven-hour daily shifts at a garment workshop where he earns 50 Turkish lira (approximately US$18) per week.

Now that I can’t go to school, it’s a tough situation. It’s hard to get used to it. I work occasionally, filling in for my sisters at the factory. When I picture my future, I see nothing.

Rasha, 16, who was unable to enroll in school when she arrived in Izmir, Turkey, from Qamishli, Syria in August 2013, because she lacked a residency permit. Unable to speak Turkish, she could not join her peers in the 10th grade, and was not allowed to join a lower grade.

Lena, Alaia, and Sibra, three Syrian sisters who came to Turkey in 2013, sit together in their family home in Istanbul. The older two, aged 10 and 9, have been out of school since 2011, while the youngest, 5, has never attended school. They attend part-time Quranic lessons at their local mosque.

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Turkey approved by the education ministry of the Syrian Interim Government, a cabinet of Syrian opposition authorities in exile in Turkey. It also lifted restrictions that required Syrian children to produce a Turkish residency permit in order to register for school. And it gave refugees free access to emergency healthcare, identity cards indicating their lawful residence in the country, the right not to be detained for their irregular entry to the country, access to family reunification mechanisms, access to legal consultation, and protection from forcible return to Syria. These changes resulted in a marked improvement in school enrollment levels, which by December 2014 had reached 20 percent.

However, for all its efforts, Turkey has not yet succeeded in making education available to most Syrian refugee children in Turkey, especially those living outside the camps, and the laudable progress to date should be considered only the beginning of efforts to scale-up enrollment. Overall, less than one-third of the 620,000 Syrian school-aged children who entered Turkey in the last four years are...
Language barriers: most Arabic-speaking Syrian children face a language barrier in Turkish-language schools.

Economic hardship: lack of money affects families’ ability to pay the costs of transportation, supplies, and—in the case of temporary education centers—tuition. Child labor is rampant among the Syrian refugee population, to whom Turkey does not give work permits due to concerns about the effects on its host unemployed population. As a result, many families are dependent on their children’s income because parents cannot make a fair wage without labor protections. Seventeen of the 30 interviewed families with out-of-school children told Human Rights Watch they relied on those children, some as young as eight, to help support the household.

In addition, despite Turkey’s revised legal framework guaranteeing access to formal education for Syrian refugee children like Mohammed, some Syrian families told Human Rights Watch that Turkish public schools continued to demand they produce documents that are no longer required for enrollment. Human Rights Watch research found that a number of addressable barriers prevent Syrian refugee children in Turkey who live outside refugee camps from attending school, above all:

- Lack of information: families lack crucial information on Turkey’s admission procedures.
- Economic hardship: lack of money affects families’ ability to pay the costs of transportation, supplies, and—in the case of temporary education centers—tuition. Child labor is rampant among the Syrian refugee population, to whom Turkey does not give work permits due to concerns about the effects on its host unemployed population. As a result, many families are dependent on their children’s income because parents cannot make a fair wage without labor protections. Seventeen of the 30 interviewed families with out-of-school children told Human Rights Watch they relied on those children, some as young as eight, to help support the household.

For example, Mohammed’s mother told Human Rights Watch that he and his 11-year-old brother were not in school because “we don’t know anything about how to register or if they are allowed to go.” She explained that because her husband does not have a work permit, he
• Creating a functional mechanism to monitor school dropouts and encourage attendance;
• Investing in training for teachers and school personnel tailored to the unique challenges of educating a non-Turkish speaking refugee population;
• Working with implementing partners such as the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to disseminate accurate information to the more than 1.8 million refugees from Syria in Turkey, including those in harder-to-reach areas, regarding the procedures and requirements for school registration.
• Improving its temporary protection regime for Syrian refugees by granting them the right to work;
• Providing widespread access to lawful work permits for Syrian beneficiaries of the temporary protection regime in order to offer disadvantaged Syrian families access to labor protections and the possibility of steady, minimum-wage work, and in doing so to mitigate the high rate of child labor among Syrian refugee households.

Failing to act urgently to ensure Syrian children’s access to education in host countries like Turkey may have a ruinous effect on an entire generation of children like Mohammed.

Securing their education now will reduce the risks of early marriage and military recruitment, stabilize economic futures by increasing earning potential, and ensure that today’s young Syrians will be better equipped to confront uncertain futures, whether it involves rebuilding their country and rehabilitating Syrian society, or contributing to their communities elsewhere in the world.

Turkey has already shouldered a very substantial burden as the host country for nearly 2 million Syrian refugees, spending approximately US$6 billion, with limited support from the international community, which should step up its financial and other support to Turkey. But Turkey too should do more to ensure that its own policies are being enforced, and to address the remaining practical obstacles that prevent ensuring Syrian children’s access to education. This includes:

• Implementing accelerated Turkish language programs through the public school system to overcome language barriers for Syrian students;
• Ensuring provincial compliance with national directive to address evidence that some public schools are not complying with laws guaranteeing Syrian children’s access to the government school system;
Since 2011, more than two million refugees have fled the conflict in Syria into neighboring Turkey. Approximately 708,000 of these refugees are school-aged children who face numerous barriers to education. While the school enrollment rate inside refugee camps is high, most refugees live outside camps. Here the education situation is bleak: only 25 percent of school-aged children were enrolled in formal education in 2014-2015.

“When I Picture My Future, I See Nothing” is the first of a three-part series addressing the urgent issue of access to education for Syrian refugee schoolchildren in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. It finds that Turkey has taken crucial steps to provide these children with access to education in recent years, including by revising its legal framework to allow Syrian children to enroll in Turkish public schools. However, practical and systematic obstacles remain. Language barriers, economic hardship that drives children into the workforce, social integration difficulties, and lack of adequate information on enrollment procedures all prevent hundreds of thousands of refugee children from attending school.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Turkish government, international donors, and implementing partners to work quickly to mitigate these barriers in order to prevent a lost generation of Syria’s children.