



# WHY YOUNG SYRIANS CHOOSE TO FIGHT

**Vulnerability and resilience to recruitment  
by violent extremist groups in Syria**

**RESEARCH SUMMARY**

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## Executive summary

This report sets out research findings on what makes young Syrians vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups in the Syrian conflict and explores sources of resilience to mitigate that vulnerability. It considers which mitigation approaches will have the most impact and makes recommendations for policy-makers and humanitarian, development actors.

The report draws on data from a qualitative study examining the views and experiences of 311 young Syrians, their families and community members in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. The study also includes desktop research, inquiry into online forums, as well as monitoring and evaluation data from peace education project activities conducted in 13 locations.<sup>1</sup> Participants include individuals previously involved in armed groups in Syria, those thinking of joining, friends and family members of fighters, teachers and social workers.

The research is focused on why Syrians join violent extremist groups, specifically Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The motivations for foreign fighters to join extremist groups in Syria was not the focus of this research.

### Drivers of vulnerability

Vulnerability among young Syrians is being generated by an absence of a means to serve basic human needs. In many instances, violent extremist groups are effectively meeting these needs.

The most vulnerable groups are adolescent boys and young men between the ages of 12 and 24, children and young adults who are not in education, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees without supportive family structures and networks.

Radicalisation is not an explanation for joining a violent extremist group per se. For Syrians, belief in extreme ideologies appears to be – at most – a secondary factor in the decision to join an extremist group. Religion is providing a moral medium for coping and justification for fighting, rather than a basis for rigid and extreme ideologies.

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<sup>1</sup> The locations have not been disclosed in order to protect the safety of our partners and beneficiaries.

The ongoing conflict creates the conditions upon which all vulnerability and resilience factors act. Addressing these factors without addressing the ongoing conflict is unlikely to succeed in preventing violent extremism in the long term.

The main factors that drive vulnerability are:

1. **lack of economic opportunity;**
2. **disruptive social context and experiences of violence, displacement, trauma and loss;**
3. **deprivation of personal psychological needs for efficacy, autonomy and purpose; and**
4. **degradation of education infrastructure and opportunities to learn.**

## Resilience factors

Resilience exists to the extent that the vulnerability factors are addressed in combination (that is, one factor alone will not provide resilience). Alert's research suggests that the main factors that underpin resilience are:

1. **alternative and respected sources of livelihood** outside of armed groups, which give individuals a sense of purpose and dignity;
2. **access to comprehensive, holistic and quality education** in Syria and in neighbouring countries;
3. **access to supportive and positive social networks and institutions** that can provide psychosocial support, mentors, role models and options for the development of non-violent social identities; and
4. **avenues for exercising agency and non-violent activism** that provide individuals with a sense of autonomy and control over their lives, as well as a way to make sense of their experiences.

## Introduction

Now in its sixth year, the conflict in Syria has killed an estimated 300,000 people in the country (12,000 of whom were children),<sup>2</sup> resulted in 6.5 million people being internally displaced<sup>3</sup> and prompted one of the largest movements of refugees in recent history. By early 2016, the conflict had resulted in over 4.8 million Syrian refugees registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),<sup>4</sup> including two million children, who had fled to neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

Armed groups are recruiting children and young people in Syria and in neighbouring countries at an alarming and ever-accelerating rate, which represents a growing challenge to peace in the region.

In October 2015, International Alert began researching the push and pull factors for young Syrians joining armed groups and assessing the role of peace education in reducing vulnerability to recruitment among young Syrians.<sup>6</sup> In order to carry out this project, Alert conducted field research in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey, and online from December 2015 to February 2016. In addition, Alert worked with four implementing partners<sup>7</sup> with expertise in delivering peace education in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey to develop and test five peace education initiatives for their effectiveness in reducing vulnerability and increasing resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups. A separate paper<sup>8</sup> deals specifically with peace education in detail; however, the purpose of this report is to focus on vulnerability and resilience to recruitment beyond the context of peace education. In so doing, it allows for a more comprehensive discussion of the issue and the implications for policy and programming.

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2 Save the Children, Education under attack in Syria, Save the Children, September 2015, p.5, [http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/educationunderattack\\_sept2015.pdf](http://www.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/educationunderattack_sept2015.pdf)

3 About the crisis, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), <http://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-country-profile/about-crisis>, accessed 17 February 2016

4 Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, UNCHR, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed 17 February 2016

5 Syrian children under siege, United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) US, <https://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/child-refugees/syria-crisis>, accessed 17 February 16

6 In this project, 'peace education' is defined as the integration of peacebuilding approaches and skills into formal and non-formal education curricula that aim to bring about an individual's desire for positive peace and an understanding of the consequences of violence; that impart skills and values to manage conflict without recourse to violence; and that encourage students to critically analyse the conflicts around and within them, including understanding the structural and cultural factors that underpin conflict and injustice.

7 The names of our partners have not been disclosed in order to protect their safety and that of our beneficiaries.

8 M. Aubrey, R. Aubrey, F. Brodrick and R. Simpson, Teaching peace, building resilience: Assessing the impact of peace education for young Syrians, London: International Alert, 2016



## Research limitations and challenges

Data collection in Syria was conducted exclusively in the north of the country. It does not include evidence from direct respondents who are currently living in regime-held areas or areas currently under the control of ISIS (although people originally from these areas did participate in the study). Security concerns in all three locations limited the number of respondents willing to take part in the study, as well as the field researchers' freedom of movement.

As a result of these limitations, the views expressed in this report do not claim to be representative or absolute. Rather, they are indicative of the main issues and trends, and are intended to contribute to a growing evidence base and provide a platform for further research and programme development. Where possible and relevant, the analysis presented in this report is contrasted with other studies on the issue.

## Drivers of vulnerability to recruitment

The research revealed that there are a number of common motivations for joining violent extremist groups. These are centred on psychological, material and social needs. Vulnerability factors do not work independently of or in isolation from other factors; there is a degree of overlap between them, and their significance in each case depends on a combination of situational and personal/individual factors. Notwithstanding this overlap and interconnectedness, for the sake of clarity, each factor is dealt with separately in the following section.

### Vulnerability factor 1: Lack of economic opportunity

Economic imperatives are a key driver for many Syrians deciding to join armed groups. Economic needs also seem to determine which armed group an individual chooses to join. There are many instances in which individuals have switched membership and allegiance based on the salaries and resources on offer and regularity of payment. The economic imperative to join armed groups is most pronounced in Syria, while it plays less of a direct role in refugee communities in neighbouring countries.

In Syria, unemployment is as high as 90% in some areas.<sup>9</sup> The tightening of border controls with neighbouring countries and restricted internal movement means that trade has become increasingly difficult. Agriculture, a previous mainstay of the Syrian rural economy, has been severely impacted by the lack of vital resources and security. Inflated prices of goods means that salaries no longer meet the basic needs of households and families are forced to borrow money to fill the income gap.

In the context of a devastated economy and little opportunity for employment, membership of an armed group offers the possibility of securing a regular income to support a household. As one respondent from the Idlib province explained, being part of an armed group is the only viable livelihood option afforded to many of the people he knows: “The economic situation for young men, inside Syria, is bad. They are only able to survive by joining a military faction either to receive salaries or for robbery and waylaying.”<sup>10</sup> The lack of funds to leave Syria – and the fear of being under even further hardship – means people are obliged to stay in their neighbourhoods and, under the pressure of the conflict, become members of armed groups.

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<sup>9</sup> T. Zaman, *Networks of self-reliance: A holistic response to the Syrian conflict*, Report prepared on behalf of International Alert, 8 July 2014 (unpublished)

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a male Syrian youth, Idlib, Syria

In areas of the country where a plethora of armed groups exist and where it is possible to move between groups, individuals have switched allegiance due to very pragmatic economic reasons. One research respondent who has also conducted research into the issue of recruitment told Alert:

*“An 18-year-old guy I met was fighting with the Free Syrian Army in the Turkmen Mountains. After two days of fighting, his unit ran out of ammunition. For two further days, he remained there, waiting to be hit by Syrian regime forces. He then managed to escape his unit, went over to Jabhat al-Nusra’s territory and [the group] offered him ammunition and a salary to fight for [it]. He didn’t believe in [its] ideology but [it] had the bullets.”<sup>11</sup>*

While the particular location in Syria and one’s social and peer network may to some extent constrain movement between groups for purely economic reasons, the above example is indicative of a broader trend.

That the need to earn a living is a primary push factor to joining an armed group in Syria suggests that the ideologies of particular armed groups play – at most – a secondary role in driving recruitment for many ordinary Syrians. Many Syrians are often not ideologically drawn to extremist groups but are merely attracted to the higher salaries that they offer their members. Fighting for an extremist group is normally far more lucrative than fighting for a moderate group. Fighters in Jabhat al-Nusra are paid US\$300–400 per month. Fighters in the Free Syrian Army are paid only – and often late – around US\$100 per month.<sup>12</sup>

Indicated by this quote, and backed up by other sources and commentators,<sup>13</sup> is the fact that Islamist groups tend to be better funded and equipped than the more secular groups and smaller, localised units that comprise the multitude of armed groups in Syria. Notwithstanding this point, the presence of corruption and nepotism within Jabhat al-Nusra, for example, has resulted in some fighters leaving the organisation and seeking an income elsewhere.

Beyond the anecdotes provided above, the majority of research participants who provided opinions on the economic imperative to join a violent extremist group

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11 Interview with Syrian youth living outside of Syria (location undisclosed)

12 Figures varied between research respondents.

13 See, for example, E. Dickinson, *Playing with fire: Why private Gulf financing for Syria’s extremist rebels risks igniting sectarian conflict at home*, Analysis paper No. 16, Washington DC: The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/12/06-private-gulf-financing-syria-extremist-rebels-sectarian-conflict-dickinson/private-gulf-financing-syria-extremist-rebels-sectarian-conflict-dickinson.pdf>

highlighted it as one of the most important motivating factors. These opinions relate to respondents' perceptions of the primary motivation for those still living in Syria. In refugee communities, economics alone is unlikely to motivate someone to return to Syria and join a violent extremist group. The research indicates that this is due to one of the following reasons:

- returning to Syria and joining an armed group costs money;
- many young people outside of Syria left because they wished to disengage from the violence; and
- Syrian youth (especially those in Turkey) who are desperate to make a living consider travelling to Europe as a more promising prospect than a return to Syria.

Economic hardship among refugees in neighbouring communities is, however, still an important factor to consider in order to understand why Syrians are joining violent extremist groups. In Lebanon, the influx of Syrian refugees has caused a severe economic, social and political strain, particularly as most refugees settled in the poorest areas, namely in Bekaa and North Lebanon. In Turkey, there is a similar scarcity of work. For the first four years of the refugee crisis, Syrians were unable to work outside of refugee camps and communities,<sup>14</sup> creating an active informal economy, but overall having a negative social and economic impact on Syrians and their Turkish host communities. In this context, rather than being a direct push factor, the lack of economic means contributes to dissatisfaction, despair, loss of agency and power, and feelings of hopelessness. In conjunction with the presence of other vulnerability factors, livelihoods are therefore one of several contributory factors for joining an armed group for the majority of refugees, rather than an explanatory factor in and of itself.

## Vulnerability factor 2: Disruptive social context and experiences of violence, displacement, trauma and loss

The impact of violence, displacement, trauma and loss cannot be understated as a motivating factor for joining violent extremist groups in Syria. Research findings, data captured through project implementation, as well as secondary literature all suggest that exposure to violence, traumatic events and deep-seated grievances towards the Assad regime are driving Syrians to join extremist groups. This is occurring in several ways and on multiple levels. First, it is stimulating strong desires to exact revenge for

<sup>14</sup> In January 2016, Ankara issued a policy permitting refugees who have been in the country for six months to apply for work permits in the provinces in which they are registered. Enacted as part of Turkey's obligations in the November 2015 deal with the European Union, which includes incentives to prevent migration from Turkey into Europe.

the death of loved ones. Second, it is stimulating the desire to achieve or regain a sense of honour. Third, it is provoking the need to fulfil perceived moral duties to protect and defend the ‘home’ and the ‘family’. And fourth, the breakdown of ‘normal’ social structures as a result of the war is leading to the desire to be part of some sort of cohesive and purposeful social group. In the absence of non-violent alternatives to meet these needs, violent extremist groups are providing one of the clearest ways to avenge personal grievances and achieve their political and social desires.

One respondent who is currently living in Aleppo stated that he perceived that “over 90% of Syrian youth seek revenge due to the death of their family members and this is what prompts them to join [in the] violence”.<sup>15</sup> The motivation to overthrow the Assad regime also has a significant bearing on the decision of which armed group to join, with the most militarily efficient, successful and well-resourced groups proving the most popular. The research suggests that the desire to overthrow the regime and exact retribution for grievances is an important driver for joining Jabhat al-Nusra in particular. As one research respondent who works in civil society education projects said: “I asked some students why they were fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra rather than anyone else. They said, ‘because they’re winning. Who wants to join a group that is losing?’”<sup>16</sup>

Another interviewee, currently living in Turkey, expressed a similar sentiment:

*“Many Syrians want to get revenge against the regime for destroying their families, houses, lives and everything else. Jabhat al-Nusra actually fights the regime and now offers the best chance to get that revenge.”<sup>17</sup>*

Jihadist and Islamist groups in particular have been quick to exploit grievances against the regime – grievances that stem not only from the violence that has been directed at civilians in the last five years, but also from the experience of oppressive rule over decades. As Isaac Kfir observes: “it is not religion that lies at Al-Qaeda’s ideological base, but grievance and insecurity”.<sup>18</sup>

The desire to oppose the Assad regime also accounts for alliances between some armed groups, both Islamist and secular. Shifting alliances on the ground is indicative of the realisation that there is a small window of opportunity for the armed opposition to deal a decisive blow to the incumbent regime. This has not been the case, however, when it comes to ISIS, which has tended not to form

15 Interview with a male Syrian youth, Aleppo, Syria

16 Interview with a Syrian male, Turkey

17 Interview with a Syrian female, Turkey

18 I. Kfir, Social identity group and human (in)security: The case of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38(4), 2015, p.233

alliances with potential rival factions, preferring instead to consolidate its control by ejecting other fighting units from territory it has captured or coercing them (often violently) into converting to its cause.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to revenge, the desire for honour and a need to fulfil a sense of moral and religious duty emerged as a key motivation for joining an armed group. Here, the gender identities and norms of young men are particularly noticeable, with many seeing their role in the armed struggle as their duty as a man to protect the honour of women, children and the land. As one research respondent told Alert: “Islam tells us that whoever defends his honour, his land and dies, dies a martyr. We are proud to all die martyrs in defence of our honour and our land.”<sup>20</sup>

Drawing on Islamic mores, the young Syrians Alert spoke to indicated that their religion is a guiding principle in their decision to take up arms, as it was often cited as a justification for violence. For example, as one interviewee stated: “religion prompts people to defend their country” and “religion orders us to defend oppressed people”.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a young male, currently living in Lebanon, said:

*“Before [the] war, I wanted to make a plane. Now, I want to make something that would destroy the plane that is bombarding the place where my parents live. Before the revolution, I wanted to get married and establish a family, have a job and live in stability. I used to love a girl who is a relative of mine but now I have other objectives and ambitions. I seek martyrdom for the sake of Allah because I am Muslim and I need to support my religion. It is a moral duty even though I don’t love death.”<sup>22</sup>*

Another young man in Aleppo explained:

*“Religion has great influence on Syrian youth, especially after the international community and the Islamic and Arab world let Syrians down. Most Syrian youth started to become extremists after the regime sectarian practices. Because of the ongoing shelling, youth became more religious for fear of sudden death.”<sup>23</sup>*

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19 Islamic State expels rivals from Syria’s Deir al-zor - activists, Reuters, 14 July 2014, <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN0FJ11020140714>; see also M. Al Attar, Al Raqqa: The reality of the military brigades, the administration of the liberated city and the revolutions to come, Al-Jumhuriya, 16 September 2013, <http://aljumhuriya.net/en/raqqa/al-raqqa-the-reality-of-the-military-brigades-the-administration-of-the-liberated-city-and-the-revolutions-to-come>

20 Focus group discussion (FGD) participant, Lebanon

21 FGD participant, Lebanon

22 Interview with Syrian male, Lebanon

23 Interview with a male Syrian youth, Aleppo, Syria

With daily exposure to mortality and the absence of wider support structures, religious frameworks enable individuals to make meaning and sense of events and develop coping strategies. In this context, religion provides a sense-making narrative, leading people to believe that their personal roles and contributions are known to God, and are acceptable and worthy. Religious teachings are used to frame involvement in conflict as a heroic, spiritual and moral duty.

It should be noted that the above examples are given to highlight how religion can frame the desires and rationale for some young Syrians to take up arms, not as an indictment of the role of Islam in generating and justifying violence. In fact, interviewees just as often cited religious teachings, institutions and role models as reasons not to become involved in violence.

The final issue to consider in this section is the disruption of social networks and local governance structures. The collapse of positive social and familial ties as a result of the war and displacement means that many Syrians – both in Syria and in neighbouring countries – lack a positive group identity to belong to and positive social structures to support them.

The structure and order that violent extremist groups have imposed on communities has – to some extent – provided appeal “to those who had been living either in the chaos of war or under the authoritarianism of a regime”.<sup>24</sup> However, the appeal of ISIS among the majority of ordinary Syrians should not be overstated. Research respondents often (although not exclusively) said that ISIS is a foreign force that lacks legitimacy and local support. The majority of individuals surveyed as part of this project, as well as the young people attending peace education sessions, consider ISIS to be brutal and illegitimate – as something to be feared rather than something to aspire to. It is more feasible, therefore, that the vulnerability to recruitment by ISIS in this context comes about due to a lack of alternative strong social and governance structures that can combat or withstand the group’s violent coercive tactics. This dynamic stands in contrast to the pull of Jabhat al-Nusra, for example, which, to a large extent, has been much more successful in establishing itself as a quasi-legitimate, community-based organisation providing relative security, protection, education and structure on a daily basis.

Although the disruption and breakdown of positive social connections and structures is contributing to vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups, it must be noted that the presence of strong family ties and social networks does not necessarily increase resilience to recruitment (although, as will be discussed, there

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<sup>24</sup> L. Khatib, *The human dimensions of life under the Islamic State*, AL-Hayat, 4 March 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/04/human-dimension-of-life-under-islamic-state>

are many cases in which they do). Evidence from the research indicates that peer pressure and family strongly influence young Syrians to join armed groups.

### Vulnerability factor 3: Deprivation of personal (psychological) needs for efficacy, autonomy and purpose

For many Syrians, the war has taken away their sense of control over their lives and destinies. It has undermined their decision-making opportunities, deprived them of a sense of meaning and purpose, and disrupted the narratives of their personal experience that shaped their views about who they were. Deprivation of personal psychological needs drives vulnerability to joining an armed group because it gives rise to a quest to regain a sense of purpose, control and significance. This is especially true for young men, for whom vulnerability is compounded by norms of masculinity.

Many of the people Alert spoke to in the course of this research – especially refugees in Lebanon – expressed anger, frustration and confusion over their current situation. They feel that they do not have control over their lives and what happens to them. Many refugees are experiencing disempowerment and discrimination from host communities. In some cases, this is motivating individuals to return to Syria and join armed groups. As one young person described:

*“I feel like a loser who has given up on his dreams. I’m dead here [in Lebanon] as much as I’m dead there. I’d prefer to die in Syria.”<sup>25</sup>*

Others saw violence as the only viable option left to regain a sense of power and control over their lives. As one young male who wished to return to Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra told Alert:

*“War, violence and blood are necessary to demonstrate the power. Power only comes with violence. While peace is sometimes good, war is necessary to avenge, especially when retaliating aggressions.”<sup>26</sup>*

Another research respondent, now living in Lebanon, explained:

*“People can find a new meaning to their life in extremism. Extremism opens a door to a new life where they are wanted. They can be useful again and get to take part in something that is big, huge – all while doing God’s work. The idea of establishing an Islamic State provides hope [for] their lives.”<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Lebanon

<sup>26</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Lebanon

<sup>27</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Lebanon



The dynamic that is implicit in the above quote reflects what Isaac Kfir (drawing on social identity theory) has identified as an explanatory factor for joining extremist groups. As he states: “once people combine knowledge of their lives, their environments, and themselves on the one hand and the group or movement they wish to join on the other, they develop the social characteristics that would allow them to join the group officially.”<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to ISIS’s violent coercive recruitment tactics mentioned above, it seems that some members of the group also use softer tactics to gain the support of the local population. One young man who now resides in Lebanon said that his desire to join ISIS over any other group is because the group treated him kindly and with respect when he encountered it in Syria. Speaking of his experience with ISIS, he said: “the first time I felt I was a human being with dignity was with [it]”.<sup>29</sup> His experiences in Lebanon have left him feeling humiliated and offended and he desires to return to Syria and join ISIS in part because he believes it will offer a way to regain some dignity.

#### Vulnerability factor 4: Degradation of education infrastructure and opportunities to learn

The degradation of opportunities to acquire an education is driving vulnerability in three context-dependent ways. For those in Syria, the collapse of the education system has contributed to vulnerability by creating a gap that armed groups have been able to fill by establishing their own education systems. For those in Syria who are not able to attend school at all, vulnerability is arising due to the absence of positive and structured environments and influences. In neighbouring countries, the lack of educational opportunities in some cases is pushing young refugee populations towards recruitment into armed groups by contributing to feelings of frustration, anger, loss and marginalisation.

The education infrastructure in Syria has been severely eroded as a result of increasing insecurity and threat of attacks on educational institutions. It is estimated that one in four schools are no longer operational because they have been damaged, destroyed or used to shelter the internally displaced or by armed groups in the conflict.<sup>30</sup> Areas contested by the Syrian government and opposition

28 I. Kfir, 2015, Op. cit., p.234

29 Interview with a Syrian male, Lebanon

30 UNICEF, Education under fire: How conflict in the Middle East is depriving children of their schooling, Amman: UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), September 2015, p.4, [http://www.unicef.org/mena/Education\\_Under\\_Fire.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/mena/Education_Under_Fire.pdf)

armed forces have been most severely impacted.<sup>31</sup> Latest estimates suggest that 52,500 teachers have been lost to the conflict<sup>32</sup> and that in Syria more than two million children are out of school.<sup>33</sup>

In many cases, education structures that have emerged in the collapse of the state system are led by violent extremist groups and are highly segregated, exploit sectarian divisions and support divisive narratives. Extremist groups are devoting considerable resources to secure support and maintain local influence through the provision of education, as well as other social services.<sup>34</sup> ISIS in particular has dedicated substantial resources to schooling and entices students with monthly stipends. ISIS has banned the teaching of psychology, sociology and history among other subjects, and outlawed any mention of the Republic of Syria. It primarily teaches Islamic subjects based on Saudi Arabia's contemporary education curricula.<sup>35</sup> ISIS has firm control over education in the territories it holds and does not allow any other organisation – civil society organisations (CSOs), relief agencies, etc. – to operate in this field. In comparison, Jabhat al-Nusra has also established a large number of schools for its fighters and youths living within its territory but has allowed some CSOs to continue running informal education sessions – this includes Alert's partner organisation, Basmeh and Zeitooneh, which is running peace education sessions in Idlib. In both cases, however, the curricula that these violent extremist groups provide are a source of vulnerability for many young people in Syria, who are growing up without any alternative sources of information or education. For many young people in Syria, the education provided by extremist groups will be the only education they have received over the past five years.<sup>36</sup>

For those in Syria who are not attending school at all, vulnerability is increasing because, in the absence of a fundamental need for education and learning, it is no longer possible to disengage from armed groups through education. Moreover, schools and universities used to be important social spaces for young Syrians to mix and socialise, find a sense of routine and purpose, continue development and learning, and build social capital across sectarian lines. As has been shown, when this is disrupted and combined with other factors, it can become a driver for vulnerability.

31 UNICEF, Curriculum, accreditation and certification for Syrian children in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, Regional study, Amman: UNICEF Regional Office for the MENA, March 2015, p.6, [http://www.oosci-mena.org/uploads/1/wysiwyg/150527\\_CAC\\_for\\_Syrian\\_children\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.oosci-mena.org/uploads/1/wysiwyg/150527_CAC_for_Syrian_children_report_final.pdf)

32 Ibid, p.11

33 UNICEF, September 2015, Op. cit., p.4

34 T. Zaman, 2014, Op. cit.

35 A. Mamouri, IS imposes new rules on education in Syria, Iraq, Al-Monitor, 21 October 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/islamic-state-impose-education-program-iraq-syria.html#>

36 J. Cafarella, Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for Al-Qaeda, Middle East Security Report 25, Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2014, p.26, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>

In refugee communities, a lack of education has slightly different effects. In Lebanon, 90% of young Syrian refugees were not enrolled in any form of education.<sup>37</sup> This was attributed to discrimination and marginalisation, lack of familiarity with and difficulty of adjusting to the Lebanese curriculum, and high costs associated with attendance.<sup>38</sup> Research also highlighted the barriers to young Syrians acquiring professional qualifications, as they were often moved into segregated classes offering the Syrian National Coalition curriculum<sup>39</sup> with a reduced Lebanese curriculum, which would prevent them from accessing higher education. The lack of education for Syrian refugees is creating a feeling of helplessness and desperation among young Syrians, making them increasingly vulnerable to exploitation. As one teacher described: “Without education, without attending school on a daily basis, what is this child supposed to do but take to the streets, beg, work, and be exposed to all the dangers that life on the street offers, be it radical thoughts, drugs, or simply an unhealthy lifestyle.”<sup>40</sup>

The segregated education system in Lebanon is also fuelling marginalisation and discrimination against Syrian children and their families. Recent research by Alert found that, when Lebanese and Syrian children in Lebanon were educated in mixed classes and in extracurricular activities, they had more positive opinions of one another, were able to set aside negative stereotypes and establish friendships. Mixing also enabled teachers to tackle issues of discrimination directly and effectively.<sup>41</sup>

A similar situation is occurring in Turkey. In 2015, 400,000 out of an estimated 700,000 Syrian children in Turkey were not in school.<sup>42</sup> The Turkish government enacted policies to ease access to school, changing regulations requiring Syrians to have residency permits, which were prohibitively expensive for most refugee families. The Turkish government also eased access to higher education with special enrolments for Syrians, limiting paperwork and tuition requirements at select public universities in southern Turkey.<sup>43</sup> The number of Syrians enrolled in Turkish universities quadrupled between the 2011–12 and 2014–15 academic years, with

37 O. Dahi, *Breaking point: The crisis of Syrian refugees in Lebanon*, Middle East Research and Information Project, 25 September 2013, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2013/09/25/breaking-point-crisis-of-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon>

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 Interview with a Syrian teacher in a school for Syrians, Lebanon

41 Z. Abla and M. Al-Masri, *Better together: The impact of the schooling system of Lebanese and Syrian displaced pupils on social stability*, London: International Alert, 2015, [http://international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Lebanon\\_LebaneseSyrianSchoolingSystem\\_EN\\_2015.pdf](http://international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Lebanon_LebaneseSyrianSchoolingSystem_EN_2015.pdf)

42 Turkey: 400,00 Syrian children not in school, Human Rights Watch, 8 November 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/08/turkey-400000-syrian-children-not-school>

43 “When I picture my future, I see nothing”: Barriers to education for Syrian refugee children in Turkey, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/11/08/when-i-picture-my-future-i-see-nothing/barriers-education-syrian-refugee-children>, accessed 25 February 2016

a total of 4,597 students enrolled as of 2015. This is in contrast to Lebanon and Jordan where Syrian university attendance fell during the same period.<sup>44</sup>

While research respondents did not cite any direct cases of individuals joining armed groups specifically because of a lack of education or because of the education that was on offer, it can be inferred from the above that the absence of education for many – and the provision of education by extremist groups for others – compounds vulnerability and reduces, if not eradicates, alternative avenues to disengage from extremist groups in Syria.

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<sup>44</sup> Syrian student numbers in Turkish universities quadruple, Today's Zaman, 3 July 2015, <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150703221958836>

## Sources of resilience to recruitment

This section sets out four sources of resilience to recruitment by violent extremist groups. It draws on evidence from the field research and data from the implementation of peace education activities.

It is important to note that resilience is not the binary opposite of vulnerability – increasing one element of resilience, which relates closely to a specific vulnerability factor, will not necessarily result in a decrease in vulnerability. Furthermore, the presence of a number of vulnerability factors does not mean that someone will join a violent extremist group. Context alone cannot explain motivation – the key dynamics to consider are the personal issues of an individual in a particular situation and how they interplay with situational factors.

The extent to which interventions that are intended to increase resilience to violent extremism can be successfully implemented will depend on the location, the level of control of violent extremist groups in that location, the needs and priorities of the communities, and (in the case of Lebanon and Turkey in particular) the regulatory, political and structural barriers to implementing effective programming. With these caveats in mind, the findings presented in this report are intended to be used as a basis for further developing and testing programming and policy, rather than as definitive answers to the question of how to prevent violent extremism in Syria.

### Resilience factor 1: Alternative and respected sources of livelihood

In an environment where armed groups, in many cases, are offering the only feasible employment opportunities, the creation of alternative livelihoods is integral to undermining the appeal of joining a violent extremist group – especially for individuals whose main motivation is financial. Research respondents cited the provision of vocational training, increasing trade supply lines and provision of small capital loans as important enabling factors for individuals to develop independent sustainable incomes and build resilience. In addition, some research participants gave examples of Syrians leaving extremist groups when they had a viable economic alternative. For example, as one individual participating in the research online stated:

*“Membership [of] armed groups fluctuated wildly in the beginning of the Syrian conflict. People were moving between groups – and they still do – depending on how much they are offered. This shows that people don’t care, it’s just about the money.”<sup>45</sup>*

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45 Interview with a Syrian male, Turkey

For refugees in the countries neighbouring Syria, the research data do not show a direct link between the provisions of livelihood opportunities and leaving or resisting extremist groups; however, the majority of research participants identified livelihood opportunities as one of the most important resilience factors. Further study into the connection between economic gain and preventing extremism in Lebanon and Turkey would be required to draw more definitive conclusions. However, despite this limitation, the data do suggest that a lack of economic opportunities for refugees contributes to frustration, disempowerment and marginalisation – factors that have been shown to drive vulnerability to recruitment. It can be inferred from the data captured so far that the creation of meaningful livelihood opportunities for Syrians would significantly combat the negative consequences of unemployment.

## Resilience factor 2: Access to comprehensive, holistic and quality education

Increasing accessibility to education plays a key part in reducing youth engagement with armed groups.<sup>46</sup> The introduction of curricula that are balanced and inclusive, that support community cohesion beyond sectarian lines and that result in formal qualifications in Syria can challenge the teachings of extremist groups. In the absence of formal education in Syria, education provided by CSOs plays a significant role.

Outside of Syria, increasing access to formal and accredited education also plays a role in reducing vulnerability. Many research participants both in and outside of Syria expressed strong desires to continue their education and gain qualifications. In some cases, the promise of completing education outside of Syria is encouraging young Syrians not to fight and to disengage from the conflict. One respondent in Syria claimed that “many students migrated to continue their education that was disrupted”.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the positive view of education and its role in promoting resilience to joining extremist groups among research respondents, there were no examples of direct cases in which an individual disengaged from an extremist group because of formal education. However, as will be discussed under ‘Resilience factor 4’, there were

<sup>46</sup> Government of Lebanon, Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), *Reaching all children with education (R.A.C.E) in Lebanon*, Beirut: MEHE, 2014, <http://www.mehe.gov.lb/uploads/file/2015/Feb2015/Projects/RACEfinalEnglish2.pdf>; UNICEF, *No lost generation initiative: Protecting the futures of children affected by the Syria crisis, One year report*, Amman: UNICEF Regional Office for the MENA, 2014, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/No-Lost-Generation-initiative-One-Year-Report-Sept-2014.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Syria

several cases where individuals disengaged from extremist groups due to involvement in non-formal education initiatives as part of civil society programmes.

The final caveat to the positive role of education that emerged from the research is that, even when options for education are present, there are many barriers for Syrian youth to be able to take advantage of them. The immediacy of basic needs such as housing and food means that the need to earn a livelihood supersedes the imperative to continue schooling. The long working hours of many Syrian youths leaves little time or energy for schooling. Schooling can also be prohibitively expensive for all ages. In Turkey, for example, private schools offering Syrian education may require fees, and, although public schools and universities nominally do not charge Syrian students tuition, these students cannot shoulder the time cost of full-time school, which does not allow them to work. Two of the research respondents now living in Istanbul complained that, although they know there are scholarships available for Syrian students,<sup>48</sup> these are few in number and very few Syrians are informed about opportunities to apply. Language barriers in Turkey also prevent students from advancing, a common refrain among university-level Syrians who require advanced proficiency in Turkish to matriculate at Turkish universities.

This suggests that increasing formal education must go hand in hand with efforts to decrease the barriers to both accessing educational opportunities and succeeding in mainstream schooling.

### Resilience factor 3: Access to supportive, positive and inclusive social networks and institutions

Supportive, positive and inclusive social networks and institutions include CSOs, families, peer networks, role models, non-governmental organisations, social service providers and religious institutions. According to the research and the results of the peace education project, these networks and institutions are combatting the pull of armed groups in several ways. They are providing a sense of belonging and positive identity, thereby helping to re-establish social capital; giving psychosocial support; and providing young people with positive adult role models and mentors whom they can trust with difficult choices, such as whether to join an extremist group. The role of the family emerged as particularly important in preventing young people from joining extremist groups and from disengaging with them if they had already joined.

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<sup>48</sup> FGD participants, Turkey

### The role of the family

Although family members have in many cases compelled young people to join armed groups in Syria, there are also cases where family members have played a significant role in pulling them back from extremist groups. Several interviewees said that they ceased fighting at the behest of a parent. In one case, a mother had sold her house and belongings so that she would be able to take her two young sons to Turkey, fearing that she would lose them to fighting. The young man recounting his story told Alert:

*“My mother was the reason why I left the fight and came to Turkey... My mother was my greatest pressure. She was always afraid for me, she did not want me to die. She is my role model and she does everything to make us happy. She is also my friend.”<sup>49</sup>*

In another case, the parents of a young man who was fighting with ISIS (and who was under the age of 18 when he was first recruited) were instrumental in getting him to leave the organisation.<sup>50</sup> The young man’s father works for a peace education organisation in Syria.

These anecdotes suggest that it is imperative to incorporate family engagement and outreach in community based-initiatives to combat recruitment.

### Positive influences outside of the family

With so many young Syrians living apart from family, wider social networks outside of the family are increasingly important to prevent young people from joining extremist groups and provide support more generally. Evidence from the peace education project shows how role models in the wider community are sources of resilience to extremist groups. In one case, a 17-year-old male attending peace education sessions in Lebanon approached his facilitator to consult with him about returning to Syria to join ISIS. The young man was under the influence of peers in Syria and wished to leave Lebanon due to the anger and frustration he felt as a result of his experiences there. Because of the relationship he had with the facilitator, he was able to discuss his options and be given alternative courses of action. He told the facilitator: “Without your guidance and what you tell us, I would have joined ISIS just like the other kid” (referring to another child who went back to Syria to join ISIS a year before).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Turkey

<sup>50</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Turkey

<sup>51</sup> Interview with a peace education facilitator, Lebanon



### Psychosocial and psychological support

Psychosocial and psychological support plays an important role in building resilience through helping young Syrians deal with grief and trauma, make sense of the conflict and manage powerful emotions such as anger and desire for revenge. Supporting positive mental health and wellbeing enables young Syrians to adapt to worsening circumstances, and to make sense of and limit the impact of the conflict.

As this section has shown, the impact of traumatic events and desire for revenge is motivating Syrians to join extremist groups. Trauma healing and building psychosocial stability in young people are bases for combatting trauma and preventing them from being drawn further into negative cycles of violence, anger and revenge. As one peace educator in Beirut explained:

*“In Syria, children who aren’t engaged in [psychosocial support] like this are so vulnerable to recruitment, they could be directly recruited by Da’esh or Al-Nusra. Without this, children would look elsewhere for this need to be fulfilled, which would make them vulnerable to armed groups, particularly ideological groups [that] specifically address this need in their recruitment practices. We give them [the] tools to express themselves in the community, rather than using weapons to express anger at their losses.”<sup>52</sup>*

Other research participants shared anecdotal evidence of friends who had suffered a traumatic event and then went and joined extremist groups. Each of these research participants identified revenge as being a primary motivation for joining these groups immediately after suffering trauma. To give one example:

*“My friend was involved in the demonstrations with me for a long time. He got picked up by the regime. He was raped and tortured in prison. As soon as he came out, he renounced the revolution as ineffective in defeating the regime. He went and joined one of the small battalions around Aleppo before eventually going over to Islamic State. He is completely brainwashed now. Last time I wrote to him online, he said that if he ever saw me again he would happily kill me.”<sup>53</sup>*

Given the levels of trauma and the role that the desire for revenge is playing in motivating recruitment to extremist groups, the provision of both psychological and psychosocial support initiatives is important. Research respondents acknowledged the importance of supportive social networks as sources of psychosocial support and enjoyment, but also indicated that they lack more formal mechanisms of support

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a Syrian male (location undisclosed)

to pointedly address the frustrations and risks they face. This situation is especially pertinent when it comes to young men, as they are often not specifically targeted or engaged in community-based programmes and interventions. In general, young refugee men are often assumed to be less vulnerable (in the broadest sense of the word) than other demographic cohorts such as women and children. Yet as research conducted by the International Rescue Committee has pointed out, single Syrian refugee men experience protection vulnerabilities that often go unaddressed.<sup>54</sup> They are also often separated from family and support networks.<sup>55</sup> Young men generally lack spaces and mechanisms through which to seek psychosocial support and positive social engagement in a way that is comfortable and convenient to them. Many of the young men Alert spoke to in the course of this research would benefit from formal mechanisms for psychosocial and psychological support that validate their pains and frustrations, and redirect these in more constructive ways.

#### Resilience factor 4: Alternative avenues for exercising agency and non-violent activism

The view held by many young Syrians who have chosen to or are considering joining extremist groups is that violence is their only option or means of attaining personal significance and affecting change. Initiatives that provide non-violent alternatives to fulfil these needs and respond to the overwhelming sense of powerlessness and helplessness are required to delegitimise the idea that violence is a solution and worthy avenue for activism, thus helping to rebuild a sense of control, empowerment, purpose and personal significance.

Several examples from the research as well as from the implementation of the peace education project underline the importance of positive civic engagement and activism in pulling individuals away from armed groups. For example, several facilitators who are involved in delivering the peace education activities have been deterred from joining Jabhat al-Nusra as a direct result of their engagement in what they see as meaningful work. As one project staff member in Lebanon told Alert:

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54 International Rescue Committee (IRC), Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugee men in Lebanon: Investigating protection gaps, needs and responses relevant to single and working Syrian refugee men in Lebanon, Beirut: IRC, 2016, <http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRC%20Lebanon%20Refugee%20Men's%20Vulnerability%20Assessment.pdf>

55 L. Dean, Dispatch #4: Don't forget the men, Lawfare, 2 February 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/dispatch-4-dont-forget-men>

*“My brother and family still reside in Syria. Today, if I hear that my brother was killed by the shelling of gas tank or artillery, be it on the hands of the opposition or the national armed forces, what would my reaction be? The impulsive, hot-tempered person that I am and knowing how I used to think before, I can honestly tell you that I would leave everything behind and go join whichever faction that allows me to go kill as many of my brother’s killers as I can, one by one. It is only because of having been exposed to and trained in civic activism and dialogue that I am able to take a step back and choose non-violence.”<sup>56</sup>*

Another research participant still living in Syria also commented on the positive role of being involved in peace education programmes: “I know someone who was with Al-Nusra Front and attended one of the [peace education programmes], and concluded that the civic work is better than the military action so he left Al-Nusra.”<sup>57</sup>

As no further details were given regarding this particular Al-Nusra fighter, it is difficult to know what other factors may have been involved in his decision to leave the group. However, it is interesting to note that he was able to engage in peace education activities at the same time as being involved with Al-Nusra.

The final example relates to the young man referenced earlier in this section, who was persuaded to leave ISIS by his father. His decision to leave ISIS seems to have been shaped by both the influence of his parents and the alternative option he was given through the Badael Foundation to engage in civic activism. Describing his experience in the peace education programme, the ex-fighter stated that through attending the programme he “learned a lot, especially how to deal with IDP children, and ... about the concepts of international human law”.<sup>58</sup>

The current research data are not exhaustive enough to allow for comment on the proportion of ex-fighters who benefited from peace education programmes, but these examples give an indication of the feasibility of encouraging members of extreme factions to leave the fighting, and to rejoin their families or be involved in civic or professional activities.

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with a peace education facilitator, Lebanon

<sup>57</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Syria

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a Syrian male, Syria

## Conclusion

The findings of this research project suggest that there are many factors that influence an individual's decision to join an extremist group. Primary data showed that economic, ideological and social motivations may overlap to attract and consolidate support for such groups, both at the level of young fighters and their communities.

Many Syrians bear grievances connected to the violence and loss of loved ones, and many desire revenge against the Assad regime. Fighting with an armed group provides an instrument through which boys and young men in particular can express grief and physically act upon their anger. Communal social values and religious beliefs are central to young men's identities, and consequently these can be mobilised by extremist groups to recruit them and consolidate support for the groups. The research also revealed that, for many individuals in Syria, economic imperatives – the need to earn a living – are among the most significant factors influencing their decision to join extremist groups. Finally, the breakdown of educational and other social structures is contributing to vulnerability to varying location-dependent degrees.

This report has also shown that the resources and conditions that build resilience against recruitment include supportive, stable social networks consisting of family and friends who can guide young men towards positive avenues and provide psychosocial support; satisfying livelihood opportunities that offer adequate compensation and equitable working conditions; opportunities to engage in non-violent activism; and affordable and accessible educational opportunities for all ages.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that, for interventions to be effective in preventing recruitment to extremist groups and/or to directly support fighters to leave extremist groups, they must respond to sources of vulnerability in comprehensive ways, recognising their interconnectedness. Specifically, interventions must:

- provide alternative sources of livelihood outside of armed groups;
- increase access to education and continued learning;
- reduce the barriers to education for refugees;
- provide alternative non-violent avenues for activism that afford young people a sense of purpose, empowerment and the ability to affect positive change; and
- promote strong, supportive social networks that enable young people to deal with grievances, trauma and the desire for revenge.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to guide donors, policy-makers and implementers seeking to reduce the engagement of young Syrians in violence, including violent extremism:

- invest in comprehensive education, accompaniment and livelihood programmes that address the most significant vulnerability factors holistically;
- provide humanitarian and development agencies with technical support to design and implement programmes that address vulnerabilities to violent extremism and measure impact;
- improve targeting of individuals or groups identified as particularly vulnerable, including IDPs in Syria, teenage boys and young men;
- directly engage parents and communities in programming;
- understand and address violent extremism in context (in other words, via a community-based approach that ensures interventions are developed in tandem with and led by local implementing partners who know and have the trust of their communities, rather than using centralised and modular programme designs);
- integrate social cohesion objectives into humanitarian aid projects, regional policy objectives and bilateral diplomacy, aiming to reduce discrimination and stigma towards refugees, which can act as a driver towards recruitment; and
- support further research into the effectiveness of preventative interventions including the development of tools for measuring impact and increased resilience.





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