

# I MUST LIVE AMIDST THE RUBBLE



Save the Children

Inclusive Recovery in Al Raqqa

## **Acknowledgements**

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In order to protect children and the families who agreed to be interviewed by Save the Children, names in this report have been changed and exact locations omitted. All testimonies are based on children's experiences while living in Syria.

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Cover photo: Issa\* is 7 years old and has just started attending school for the first time. Photo taken by Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2017, Al Raqqa was captured from ISIS following a sustained ground and aerial campaign by armed groups supported by international forces under the Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Launched in June 2017, Operation “Wrath of Euphrates” saw thousands flee their homes, emptying the city. Schools, hospitals and homes were destroyed, leaving a city in near ruins. Others were forced into acting as human shields for ISIS fighters or were unable to escape the violence. At the height of the campaign, the Coalition was conducting around 150 airstrikes every day, that resulted “in the destruction of much of Al Raqqa city and large numbers of civilian casualties.”<sup>1</sup>

Almost four years since it was taken, thousands of people have returned, relocated or fled fresh violence in other parts of the country to Al Raqqa. Estimates suggest that between 270,000-330,000 people are currently living in the city. Around 82 per cent of residents originate from the city, though 48 per cent of them are returnees meaning they were displaced at some point during Syria’s conflict, including the military campaign to recover Al Raqqa. Just under one in five of current residents are internally displaced people (IDPs) from other parts of Syria.

The vast majority (92 per cent) of adults surveyed by Save the Children in October 2020 wish to stay in Al Raqqa, to find safety and to try to rebuild a life for themselves and their families.

But while people have returned, they face life in a city of ruins. In four years, there has been little by way of rehabilitation of the city’s damaged homes, schools, hospitals and basic public services, leaving Al Raqqa’s children facing an uncertain and insecure future, often living in abject poverty, in damaged homes, with limited or no access to quality education. Their families face multiple challenges, relying on few work opportunities and limited humanitarian assistance for their everyday survival.

As Syria’s overall economic situation continues to decline and humanitarian needs increase, it is essential to focus on restoring the dignity of communities in places like Al Raqqa. Families in the city face a dire economic situation which continues to deteriorate and rising food insecurity; drought and low levels of water in the Euphrates limiting access to clean, affordable water; and the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic with few hopes of receiving vaccines even in the longer-term. The scale of the crisis has become so acute that there are increasing reports from Save the Children staff of people leaving cities like Al Raqqa and returning- or attempting to return- to IDP camps where they believe they will be able to access better services.

The scale of challenges facing communities requires a shift in focus towards early recovery and restoration of basic services for children and their families. Children should be supported back into education; facilities should be rehabilitated; and people's rights respected and protected. These activities must be needs-based, community-led, transparent and rooted in accountability to communities themselves.

This paper sets out the key challenges facing chil-

dren and their families in Al Raqqa today, drawn from an area-based assessment conducted in October 2020 and interviews conducted in June 2021, focusing specifically on the impacts of a damaged city and homes; access to education for children; and prospects for livelihoods for parents.<sup>2</sup> Ensuring that families can rebuild their lives requires urgent investment and coordinated efforts, from the municipal authorities, international actors and local and international humanitarian organisations.

Al Raqqa city is located in North East Syria by the Euphrates River, at the intersection of trading routes to Iraq, Turkey and southern parts of Syria.

As the conflict in Syria escalated from 2011 onwards, Al Raqqa received large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of Syria, but later witnessed an exodus of the majority of its population due to both the control of ISIS and the subsequent military campaign to defeat it between 2013 and late 2017. The people of Al Raqqa city in Northeast Syria have experienced some of the heaviest fighting and bombing in the course of the Syrian conflict.

Following ISIS's defeat in the city, returns started to take place. In addition, new waves of IDPs from other locations, including those displaced by the Turkish incursion to Northeast Syria in late 2019, have added to the city's population. Today the city's inhabitants are governed by the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES).



## 2. A SENSE OF SAFETY: THE LASTING IMPACT OF HOSTILITIES ON AL RAQQA

While the city may not have witnessed active hostilities in four years, security concerns persist. People we spoke to still report that the widespread destruction, piles of rubble and collapsed buildings make them feel unsafe. Recreational activities for children are very limited, and parents worry about rubble across the city including the risk of explosive remnants of war in various neighbourhoods of the city.



Destroyed buildings in Raqqa city four years after the city was recaptured from ISIS. Photo taken on 1 June 2021/ Save the Children

Firyal\*, a 38-year-old mother of four children doesn't believe there are safe places for her children to play because of so many destroyed buildings and her fears about landmines. The building next to their home was used as a base by armed groups and she is worried that there may still be dangerous materials there.

More people worry about boys' safety more than girls. This may be related to boys spending more time out of the home, including at work with many fears about work accidents. Firyal's 14-year-old son, who collects plastics for a living, has seen people doing the same thing killed by landmines.

Others we spoke to talked of their fears of ISIS sleeper cells in the city and the risk of a resurgence of the group, or about their fears that young people might turn to crime because they lack meaningful opportunities to earn a living. People living in the city report low levels of social tensions in their community, especially because of the significant diversity within the population, but warned that these tensions could begin to rise should levels of economic hardship that families face continue.

Furthermore, the levels of violence that many of those in Al Raqqa today have experienced is profound and the impacts on their psycho-social well-being is significant. The various stressors related to the Syrian context, including exposure to violence, discrimination, and experiences of loss and poverty are well known to have a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children. Despite clear wishes to remain and settle

in Al Raqqa long-term, people spoke to us about concerns about the future, particularly fear of further displacement, as well as fears around losing their home or income.

Safe homes, livelihoods for parents, and access to basic services including education can act as crucial stepping stones in helping children and their families process their past and current circumstances and experiences. Sami's headteacher said, **"Here we provide psychological support and education. As a psychological state plays a major role when it comes to education. Such centers help children overcome their fear and anxiety, the psychological support is very important, children here can play and dance with teachers, here you can see children smile and laugh."** But opportunities for children to access recreational activities, mental health or psychosocial support services are rare.



Yaseen\* is 12 and is currently living in a building site with his family. Photo taken by Muhannad Khalid, Save the Children.

# 3. CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO SCHOOL AND A QUALITY EDUCATION

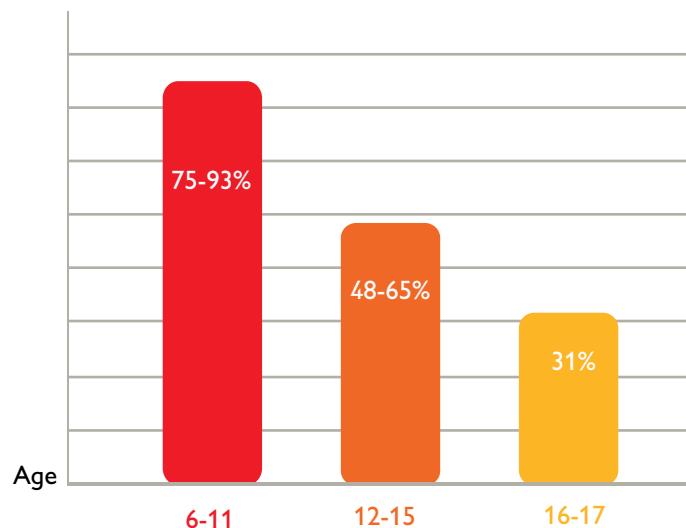
I was very happy when I first went to school. I used to look at the kids going to school and cry to my mother and tell her I want to go to school like them. She would say where should I get the money from to send you to school? ... I know how to read the letters now, then I come home to teach my mom and dad. I walk to school every day in the sun and I get sweaty and tired, and I wish we had a car to take me.

**-Issa\***

Four years after Al Raqqa was taken, more than 80 per cent of the city's schools remain damaged.<sup>3</sup> Of an estimated 85 schools, only 21 have been rehabilitated today according to key informants Save the Children spoke to. This risks denying thousands of children access to education, with children who are able to enroll studying in over-

crowded, sometimes damaged buildings. 14 per cent of children do not attend school at all, and almost 20 per cent attend fewer than three times a week. Children's rates of attendance drop as they grow older for both boys and girls, and 65 per cent of children with disabilities do not attend school at all.

## School attendance rates:





Schools were often used as military bases by ISIS, with education materials looted or destroyed. Many teachers fled during the conflict, and the local authorities have only been able to provide limited opportunities to attract qualified staff back to schools in the city. A teacher who had returned told us, **“We left our house and were displaced out of Raqqa... but we eventually came back and lived with many other families in a school. Now I’m a school teacher, how ironic is that?”**

As a result of displacement and disruption to education in the city, many teachers lack qualifications or professional training to support them. This limits the chances of students obtaining sustainable, quality educational opportunities, which can later increase the risk of dropping out and limit their employment prospects in their adult lives.

Finally, many children are not able to attend school even where they have access to a school building. Many parents of children not currently in

school said that they were not able to send their children to school because they needed to work to earn an income, to stay home to support parents or, if children were not necessarily required to work at home or outside the home, because their parents simply could not afford the transportation and other costs to send them.

Two mothers told Save the Children of the additional costs of sending their children to school. Farah\* is a 24-year-old mother of six children. She had twin boys who passed away after being born with severe disabilities, and now cares for her two seven-month-old twin girls and her two sons aged seven, Sami\* and his brother, aged five. She told Save the Children; **“I can’t afford to buy them all the things they need to go to school. The pens cost money, the notebooks cost money, not to mention that I will not be able to give them lunch or money to buy lunch.”**



Sami\* is 11 years old and has just started attending school again after a long break from education due to conflict. Photo taken by Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children





Issa\*, 7 attending lessons with his classmates. Photo taken by Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children

Both Issa\* and Sami\* were recently able to enroll in schools funded by NGOs; **“I found a torn bag on the street and took it to my mother, and she fixed it for me with some threads and tape. They also gave me a notebook and a pen at school,”** said Issa. Not all of their siblings have been so fortunate. Sami’s older brother is 14 and looking for work. His mother thinks it is too late for him to go to school, so while he looks for work, he collects plastics for income. Their mother worries about whether she will be able to afford to send her 7- and 5-year old daughters to school, despite the fact she believes their education is a top priority. Neither are currently enrolled.

Education is a lifeline for so many children, providing them with an opportunity to learn, thrive and spend time with their peers. When home is not safe for a child, school can provide some protection. Without education, it is impossible to break the cycle of poverty. A collapsed educational system limits chances of having a promising future, condemning people to participating in informal working conditions that often have low wages, long hours and little protection.

## 4. AL RAQQA'S DAMAGED HOMES

While thousands of people have returned or moved to Al Raqqa since 2017, Save the Children found that **of the 67 per cent of people living in their own homes in Al Raqqa, half are living in damaged homes.** High demand for housing combined with the low levels of rehabilitation of infrastructure has left many, particularly

IDPs, stranded in camps, informal settlements and unfinished buildings. Research conducted in 2019 estimated that around 40 per cent of Al Raqqa's buildings were habitable and 36 per cent entirely destroyed, suggesting an extremely low level of rehabilitation of housing stock and very little improvement in people's living conditions.



Sami\* 11 at home with his mother Firyal\* and siblings. Photo taken by Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children

**“In this house, we don’t have electricity or running water. But recently our neighbor allowed us to use one ampere and it helps put on lights at night. We also don’t have clean running water; we extended a pipe from the main water line for one faucet, but the water runs muddy. The roof is falling which makes me fear that one day one of the kids would get hurt if a rock fell on them. It started raining once so I had to take the kids outside as big chunks of the roof started falling in. The owner came by the other day and told us that we have to start moving out, so we decided to move to the destroyed house across the street.”**

**-Farah\***

Al Raqqa's IDPs face a particularly precarious living situation. Over a third of people Save the Children surveyed said they were not confident about their ability to stay; almost all of these people were living in rented accommodation or in unfinished or abandoned buildings, unable to pay rent in the long-term and fearing eviction from property owners or the local authorities. Like Farah\*, Firyal\* and her children lived in a destroyed house that lacks walls, a door and barely has running water. They cannot afford electricity, as **one ampere costs 2000 SYP, equivalent to four days of bread for the family.**

## ■ 5. ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS

**“My husband makes around 150,000 (around USD 120) per month. If you calculate it, it won't cover diapers, milk and medicine for the younger ones... What my children eat depends on our financial situation during the day.”**

**-Farah\***

The economic situation of the households in Al Raqqa is precarious. The conflict, massive displacement and the period of ISIS rule have led to the decimation of local services, the long-term rupture in investment in technical capacity and loss of human capital. Despite a revival of some businesses and commencement of small-scale rehabilitation projects, unemployment and lack of access to income is very high and humanitarian needs in the city remain vast.

While many families do have some access to jobs and livelihoods, including casual or wage labour, skilled labour, or salaried employment, humanitarian assistance and remittances remain critical life lines. While assistance and remittances are the main source of income for 16 per cent of households, they are a secondary income source for 58

per cent, so in total, three quarters of the population rely on these sources to ensure that they have sufficient income to purchase food and other basic goods and services.

While IDPs have the same employment rates as others in the community, their average income is only 87 per cent that of a non-displaced household, likely because they rely more heavily on wage labour. Farah\* told us; **“Last Ramadan [my husband] had no work at all and sat at home for the entire month. I started craving the simplest foods; we had nothing. My children are deprived of everything, and we cannot afford to buy them their basic needs, especially when it comes to their nutrition.”**



Despite the income and humanitarian assistance they receive, many families continue to struggle. Compounding the challenge for many families is Syria's overall fragile economy which has suffered multiple shocks and deteriorated significantly over the past two years. As the value of the Syrian Pound has dropped, prices of food and other essential items has increased significantly. In April 2021, across the country the national average food basket was 100 per cent higher than it was in October 2020 and 247 per cent higher than April 2020.<sup>4</sup> The situation has been particularly acute in Al Raqqa city and the Al Raqqa sub-district in which it is located. As of May 2021, Al Raqqa sub-district- which includes Al Raqqa city- had the highest proportion of households with poor or borderline food consumption.<sup>5</sup>

The North East of Syria, as well as other areas of the country, is also experiencing a water crisis, caused by the worst drought in nine years, low water levels in the Euphrates and the deficient functioning of the Alouk water station. Raqqa has been particularly affected by the Euphrates water levels and drought owing to its location on the banks of the river. Water prices have increased significantly in the sub-district between January and May 2021, making it more challenging for families with limited resources to afford sufficient clean water, including to ensure they are able to abide by COVID-19 prevention measures in the absence of vaccines. Health facilities have reported increased incidences of water-borne diseases in Al Raqqa sub-district.



Damage in Al Raqqa, Syria, caused by conflict. Photo taken by Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children

80 per cent of the families in Al Raqqa we surveyed have resorted to negative coping mechanisms in order to meet their basic needs. This includes purchasing food on credit, spending savings and- for 20 per cent of those we spoke to- removing children from school. Like Sami's older brother, a quarter of the 13-17 year olds we surveyed were either working or looking for work.

## 6. EFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN

The level of needs in Al Raqqa require thoughtful engagement between actors, including the municipal authorities, local and international INGOs and the donor community. Needs across the city are high, and often correlate to people's displacement status as well as the parts of the city they live in. IDP children are less likely to attend school and their parents are less likely to be working. They are also more likely to live in inadequate or damaged housing. Some challenges are present for everyone in the community, including damaged infrastructure and a deeply challenging economic environment.

### Area-based approaches

The purpose of an area-based programming approach is to support a gradual shift from reliance on humanitarian assistance to supporting resilience at individual and community levels, and reviving authorities' ability to deliver key services and meet the needs of the population. An area-based programming approach also aims to support sustainable local integration of displaced populations, reintegration of returnees and overall recovery of the host community, ensuring that the specific needs of each of them are accounted for and accounting for the changes in demand for services resulting from population movements.

It includes the following elements:

- **Geographic focus:** targeting geographic areas with high levels of need delineated by physical, social or administrative boundaries
- **Multi-sectoral approach:** considering needs, capacities and access to services across all sectors and their interlinkages
- **Recognising and engaging with multiple stakeholders:** involving all the actors present or operating in the location, such as local authorities, local civil society and service providers, diaspora, international organisations, etc.
- **Inclusive and participatory approach:** considering all population groups in the area, such as non-displaced, IDPs, returnees, ethnic minorities, people of different ages and genders, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Taking an area-based approach to the challenges in Al Raqqa would focus on the needs of all people, across all sectors, ensuring an equitable benefit for those populations and individuals with specific needs. Because area-based approaches define an “area” rather than sector or target group as the main entry, this can be particularly useful if residents in a city or areas of a city have high levels of complex, inter-related and multisectoral needs.<sup>7</sup>

Given the severity of need, the expectation that needs will continue to rise and fears about the future among the population in Al Raqqa, it is crucial to ensure that all services and opportunities provided are sustainable and equitable. This requires substantially increased focus on the scale and quality of local service provision.

Applying a recovery and resilience lens, within the context of the third pillar of the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), is critical to ensure that people are able to “access their rights, overcome aid dependence, and turn the dividends of humanitarian interventions into longer-term building blocks for sustainable livelihoods, income-generating opportunities, and the ability to cope with future shocks.”<sup>8</sup> This needs to be the focus, while humanitarian needs remain high and are escalating across the North East of Syria and while conflict remains across the country. Early recovery support should not be conflated with support for the eventual reconstruction of Syria.

Early recovery activities must be needs-based, community-led, transparent and accountable to communities themselves.

Transitioning to an area-based programming approach requires thoughtful coordination and transparent communication in order to avoid creating tensions between areas. The population of Al Raqqa generally feels neutral about the governance system and practices in the city, with only about one-in-five reporting that they trust the government, and another one-in-five reporting distrust. While community representatives told Save the Children that they were concerned over the poor level of various municipal services and lack of transparency on how humanitarian assistance is distributed in the city, the lack of local authority presence in the lives of many remains a gap. But this can act as an opportunity for renewed and concerted efforts to collaborate to invest in supporting inclusive local governance and the capacity of local civil society.

Strengthening local civil society structures is a crucial element to ensure that the concerns and priorities of populations are voiced, and decision-makers can be held to account, while engaging with municipal authorities can support authorities’ capacity and translate into improved governance and service delivery.



## 7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Issa\*, 7 attending lessons with his classmates. Photo taken by Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children

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**“One day I was visited by a man and a woman, and they said they can enroll my son in a nearby school. I felt like the whole world smiled upon me and imagined how happy I would be if my son was able to at least read and write his name. My son changed after he was enrolled last month. He wakes up excited to wash his face and go to the school”**

**-Farah\***

Four years on from the intensity of the battle in Al Raqqa, children and their families still live amongst rubble, damaged buildings and risk every day, much of it caused by airstrikes by the Coalition to Defeat ISIS. The Coalitions members include some of the largest donors to Syria's humanitarian response. They bear responsibility to subsequently address the consequences of their security objectives, and the needs that have resulted from the destruction that the action of their military operation has contributed to.

The Coalition states that it supports inclusive local recovery and stabilization in areas “liberated from Daesh/ ISIS” .<sup>9</sup> But needs-based humanitarian action independent of military and security objectives remains urgently needed in many areas that were taken from ISIS. Children and their families in Al Raqqa live every day in a ruined city, with limited options, amid drought, pandemic and a Syria-wide economic crisis. Substantive humanitarian responses, responding to the complexity of the needs, remain limited. In the circumstances children face, and with their parents' fears for their future, it is vital that they and all humanitarian donors step up to ensure that basic services are restored and opportunities are provided, to give children the chance of a brighter future after all that they have endured over the course of Syria's conflict.

#### **Municipal authorities in Al Raqqa should:**

- Support rehabilitation efforts in the city, with guiding principles of
  - Community ownership, with clear mechanisms for community engagement and ownership on priority projects and initiatives;
  - Transparency and accountability, with a strong emphasis on consulting and communicating with communities and civil society.
- Ensure that basic services are accessible to all residents of the city, and that prioritisation of locations for humanitarian assistance is done based on needs, in coordination with national and international humanitarian organisations;

#### **Bilateral donors should:**

- Commit to fund and support the recovery and rehabilitation of Al Raqqa city. This should include
  - The rehabilitation and repair of housing stock, providing support for people to claim their housing, land and property rights, particularly for female head-of-households;
  - Rehabilitation of schools to ensure they are safe, accessible and adequately resourced to ensure children have access to education, including through support for teaching supplies and retention of high quality teaching staff, and support to teacher training.

- Supporting the technical capacity of local authorities to deliver good quality services, including by supporting their capacity to engage with communities, including children and young people, to analyse needs and providing technical support to strategic planning and development of policies and plans that aim to respond to gaps in local services;
- Invest resources in supporting the local civil society and local humanitarian responders, including through working with local partners in the design of humanitarian and recovery projects to ensure these reflect the interests and priorities of communities;
- Support and facilitate information exchange and coordination between the humanitarian response community and stabilisation actors as well as the private sector in order to capitalise on comparative areas of strength.

#### **Humanitarian actors should:**

- Operationalise an area-based programming model in communities of return and areas hosting IDPs including by:
  - Ensure that programme design and funding allocations are based on evidence on the expressed needs of populations, including through effectively addressing recovery and resilience-building, in order to maintain accountability;
- Support the technical capacity of local authorities to deliver quality services, including supporting their capacity to engage with communities, including children and young people, to identify needs and develop policies and plans to respond to service gaps;
- Support and work with local civil society, including local humanitarian organisations and responders;
- Engage stabilisation actors and the private sector to share information and reduce duplication in responses.



Sami\* 11 (L) at home with his mother Farah\* and siblings. Photo taken by Muhannad Khaled/ Save the Children



# ENDNOTES

1. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 1 February 2018; <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-37-72.docx>

2. The primary data collection methodology for this research included a survey of 426 households, with interviews conducted with one adult representative on behalf of the whole household and 391 individual level opinion polls, with a particular focus on young people aged 16-24 years of age.

3. According to key informants interviewed for the research, October 2020

4. Syria nVAM Bulletin Issue #55, May 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000128304.pdf>

5. Syria nVAM Bulletin Issue #55, May 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000128304.pdf>

6. Based on the Urban Settlements Working Group, 2020, Settlement Approaches Guidance Note: Where boundaries and action merge

7. Area-Based Approaches in Urban Settings: Compendium of Case Studies May 2019 Edition, Urban Settlements Working Group, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/201905013\\_urban\\_compendium.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/201905013_urban_compendium.pdf)

8. Building Early Recovery and Resilience into Syria's Humanitarian Response: INGO Insights into Effective Early Recovery"; February 2021, endorsed by Save the Children

9. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/2021/article/ministerial-meeting-of-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-daesh-isis-joint>