

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

My right to learn: Reintegration into school empowers Iraqi children in Syria

“I haven’t been in school since my family and I left Iraq, a year and a half ago. I’m scared, I won’t be able to keep up,” says 16-year-old Sarah, as she registers at Al-Hajjira secondary school. “It’s not just the academic side that worries me. Things at home aren’t so good – we are running out of money and that keeps us on edge. I guess I will never become a doctor, though that is what I always dreamt of.”

One quarter of the students at Al-Hajjira are Iraqis. The school is located in the under-serviced Damascus suburb of Sayida Zeinab, home to the highest concentration of Iraqi refugees arriving in Syria since 2003. “Integration for the Iraqi students hasn’t been easy,” says school advisor Faiza Hallab. “On the one hand, there are differences in the curriculum, so keeping up with new subjects, especially French and to a lesser extent English, is difficult. But it is the fact that they have suffered so much, and witnessed such violence, that makes their adaptation to a new environment so much tougher than it would be for any other child,” Hallab adds. “Also remember that many children have missed a year, and often more than that.”

Indicative of the problems faced by Iraqi children entering school is a general unwillingness at first to socialize and participate. “Their confidence in the world has suffered as a consequence of their experiences of war and displacement,” says school director Mahmoud Ibrahim.

But it is with surprising speed that confidence returns. Fourteen-year-old Shahd, for instance, also arrived in Syria 18 months ago. The difference is that, unlike Sarah, she attended school last year. She too dreams of becoming a doctor, but she has confidence her dream will come true. “I know I’ll have to study hard, but I will make it,” she says.

On the whole, Iraqi refugee children are confronted with a variety of interlinked difficulties. The traumas of war and displacement are compounded by the financial insecurity many of their families face as they try and live off their savings.

Part of UNICEF’s global mandate is to ensure that children’s right to education is protected. “Not only do children benefit by learning, school also provides the protection they need to grow up healthy and confident,” says UNICEF Education Officer Farid Boubekour. No doubt such protection is particularly essential for children who have undergone violence as extreme as that which plagues Iraq today, and the fear that displacement brings.

So far, facing up to the challenge of integrating Iraqi children into the public school system, the Government of Syria in coordination with UNICEF has taken numerous steps, including the introduction of a double-shift system. UNICEF is also set to provide schools with assistance in the form of desks, whiteboards

and other basic materials – so that the presence of Iraqis in the schools becomes a momentum for overall improvement.

UNICEF will focus in particular on the 138 schools nationwide where there are over 50 Iraqi children, in part by providing teachers with training manuals. A programme to train counsellors was launched in November 2007.

But much remains to be done. “Today there are between 250,000 and 300,000 Iraqi children of school age in Syria,” Boubekour says. “Of these, only 34,000 attended school last year, and it is estimated that 80,000 have registered this year. These figures contrast with the fact that so many of the children’s parents have advanced degrees, and that the overwhelming majority of Iraqis are literate. We think that there are still large numbers of Iraqi children out there that should be in school.”

Support is required to help the Syrian school system cope, both technically and in terms of infrastructure, with the new influx of students, says Planning Director at the Syrian Ministry of Education Abdel Salam Salameh. “We are facing problems with the education system as a whole – and this is what we need to fix if we are to integrate Iraqi children as well as we should,” Salameh adds.

In addition, commitment is needed to help Iraqi children whose economic problems have kept them out of school. “I want to learn. But at least this way my elder sister can continue in school,” says 15-year-old Osama, who works odd jobs for as little as US\$ 1 a day. “I used to like school but now things are different. I suppose the world just isn’t on my side.”