



Access to Education in Crisis-Affected Middle Eastern Countries with a focus on Lebanon and Syria - 2026 – Report

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Abstract

This report examines the state of education in conflict-affected Middle Eastern countries, with a particular focus on Lebanon and Syria. Across the region, prolonged instability has disrupted access to education and left many children experiencing years of interrupted schooling. Despite this, educational disruption often remains overlooked within broader discussions surrounding conflict and humanitarian response, even though it carries major long-term consequences for development, inequality, social mobility, and post-conflict recovery.

Within Lebanon, the report explores how overlapping crises over recent years have severely affected the country's education system and prevented meaningful recovery. Key themes include the widening divide between public and private education during the current conflict, the conversion of public schools into shelters for displaced populations, unequal access to internet infrastructure necessary for remote learning, increasing school dropout rates linked to worsening economic and political instability, and the mental health consequences of prolonged educational disruption.

A central part of the analysis focuses on the evolution of remote learning. During the initial stages of disruption, education relied heavily on improvised solutions such as WhatsApp-based communication between teachers, students, and parents due to the absence of formal digital infrastructure. Over time, this gradually became more structured, with the Lebanese government introducing free mobile data programmes to support students, alongside increased NGO involvement in educational provision.

The report then connects these developments to the experiences of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, particularly those who have recently begun returning to Syria. It explores both the educational challenges refugees experienced in Lebanon and the difficulties of reintegrating into Syrian education systems after years of displacement and interrupted schooling.

Finally, the report examines the NGO and humanitarian sector across both countries, focusing on shifting donor priorities and increasing efforts to support education within shelters, displacement settings, and non-formal educational environments.

The research is highly qualitative and draws mainly on semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with professionals working in education, humanitarian response, refugee support, and academic research as well as reports produced by organisations such as Save the Children and UNICEF.

Note from the author

This report was created from the observations and through the contacts of the Another Perspective Foundation, established over recent years of activities focused primarily in Lebanon. It was produced at an extremely dynamic moment in the region – the interviews were conducted between March and May 2026. This report explores the state of education in Lebanon and also addresses the state of education in Syria – a country that has been deeply connected to Lebanon in recent years due to migration movements. The report aims to open a discussion on education in regions where it often ceases to be a priority because of threats to life.

Introduction

Across conflict-affected regions of the Middle East, access to education has become increasingly disrupted by overlapping crises including armed conflict, political instability, economic collapse, displacement, and infrastructural breakdown. While these issues are widely discussed within humanitarian and political discourse, education is often treated as a secondary concern despite its importance for long-term recovery, social stability, and future economic development.

In many cases, educational systems are not disrupted temporarily but repeatedly over long periods of time. Children experience interruptions to schooling across multiple years, resulting in cumulative learning loss, widening inequality, declining educational quality, and long-term consequences for future employment, mental health, and social mobility.

This report focuses specifically on Lebanon and Syria, as well as the relationship between them through displacement and migration. In 2023 Lebanon's primary school completion rate was 67% while Syria's 60%. Back in 2003, however, that rate was 73% for Lebanon and 98% in Syria (Data API UNESCO, 2026). Within those 20 years, Lebanon has experienced overlapping economic, political, and humanitarian crises, all of which have placed significant pressure on public infrastructure, including the education system. Syria, meanwhile, continues to face the long-term consequences of more than fifteen years of conflict, which has severely affected educational infrastructure, continuity of schooling, and access to formal education across the country.

The relationship between the two countries is central to understanding educational disruption in the region. Lebanon has hosted large numbers of Syrian refugees for over a decade, placing additional strain on public schools and infrastructure while simultaneously creating new educational needs. More recently, some Syrian refugee families have begun returning to Syria, creating further complexity as children attempt to reintegrate into Syrian education systems after years of displacement and interrupted schooling.

The report is structured around three main sections: Lebanon, the interaction between Lebanon and Syria, and Syria itself. Across these sections, it explores key themes including inequality between public and private education, remote learning and digital access, the use of schools as shelters, dropout rates linked to instability, mental health impacts, and the role of NGOs and government interventions.

The research is based on qualitative methods, including interviews conducted by the author with professionals working in education, humanitarian response, refugee support, and research sectors in Lebanon, alongside analysis of reports produced by organisations such as Save the Children and UNICEF. Interviews have been conducted between March and May 2026, hence during a tense and rapidly changing situation in Lebanon.

Lebanon

Lebanon is a country that has faced various conflicts within the past few years: economic collapse in 2019, Covid-19, followed by explosion in the port of Beirut in 2020, Israel-Palestine war since 2023 where a lot of Southern Lebanon associated with Hezbollah has been targeted and finally most recent 2026 Iran War during which various places in not only Southern Lebanon have been targeted by bombings in early 2026. Research draws on interviews conducted throughout early 2026 with some individuals being interviewed during the most intense period, i.e. 8th April Israeli attacks on Lebanon and some in early May during a ceasefire.

Public and Private Education During Crisis

Lebanon's education system has always been deeply divided into public and private. Over 70% of students attend private schools compared to only 28% in public schools (R. Baddour, Dr. S. BouJaoude, 2025). One of the strongest themes emerging from the research is the growth of this divide during the current period of instability.

Recent conflicts have left 1.3M people internally displaced (UNICEF, 2025). Interview participants repeatedly highlighted how public schools have increasingly been converted into shelters for displaced populations during periods of conflict. While this plays a crucial humanitarian role, it has also significantly disrupted the functioning of the public education system, as schools are often unable to continue operating normally while housing displaced families.

Rym Dada-Husseini, the Treasurer of Rotary Club in Tripoli, explained that many people living in southern Lebanon were forced to flee their homes and relocate to northern regions or safer areas around Beirut. As a result, many public schools were transformed into shelters. Schools functioning as shelters were no longer able to operate as before, and in some cases had to close entirely.

Nooramaria Parika, Education Officer working with UNICEF explained that, at the time of the interview (early May 2026), 362 public schools were officially being used as shelters, directly disrupting education for the children enrolled there. Beyond the issue of schools functioning as shelters, simply travelling to school during periods of active conflict was often considered unsafe.

Private schools, by contrast, were generally not used as shelters. As a result, they were less affected by this specific form of disruption and were often able to continue operating either fully in person or through hybrid learning systems. Multiple interviewees argued that the war had deepened the already existing divide between public and private education in Lebanon.

Participants noted that students attending private schools were significantly more likely to have access to stable internet connections, electricity, transportation, and teachers who were still able to teach consistently. Teachers in private schools also generally received better salaries, which helped maintain motivation and continuity during periods of instability.

Balsam Gharib, Research and Data Analyst at American University of Beirut, described how even within the public sector there were major inequalities between schools. In some cases, schools with multiple buildings were able to continue functioning partially by converting only one building into a shelter while continuing classes in another. However, many schools did not have this capacity. As a result, educational continuity depended heavily on geography, infrastructure, and the local security situation.

Several interviewees also emphasised the growing regional inequality within Lebanon itself. Areas further away from Beirut and Mount Lebanon were described as having significantly weaker educational infrastructure and fewer resources.

The situation also created a moral dilemma: whether priority should be given to housing displaced populations or preserving children's access to education. Within broader

humanitarian response structures, education was often treated as less urgent than immediate needs such as shelter, food, health, and safety.

Remote Learning: From Improvisation to Institutional Response

Remote learning became one of the primary responses to educational disruption during periods when physical access to schools was limited or impossible.

During Covid-19, the first major disruption to education access, remote learning systems were highly improvised. Interviewees repeatedly described how teachers relied heavily on WhatsApp to continue teaching students.

Rym Dada-Husseini explained that teachers often sent videos, voice notes, lessons, agendas, and assignments to parents through WhatsApp groups, leaving parents responsible for helping children follow the material at home. Carol Abdul-Khalek, Durable Solutions Associate at UNHCR Lebanon, described public school teachers recording fifty-minute voice notes and sending them to students during the Covid-19 period because no formal online infrastructure existed.

Several participants stressed that this method was highly inefficient and contributed to major learning loss. Many households lacked stable electricity, internet access, or digital devices. In Lebanon, electricity was often only available for a few hours each day. Wealthier households sometimes had private generators, but this was not accessible to most families, especially displaced populations.

Interviewees noted that these infrastructural inequalities further deepened the divide between students from different economic backgrounds.

Over time and with new crises, however, remote learning became more structured. Participants described government-led initiatives that attempted to formalise online education. Internet companies began providing students with free mobile data packages, including programmes offering twenty gigabytes of free data to support educational access, support launched by Ministry of Education and financed through UNICEF's funds.

Interviewees also described this shift as unprecedented in terms of the speed with which schools and ministries adapted to online teaching. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education allowed schools flexibility in choosing the most suitable system depending on local conditions, including fully online, hybrid, or partially in-person teaching.

UNICEF-supported initiatives also provided students in shelters with digital devices and free data access. However, participants still noted that overcrowded shelters and weak connectivity continued to limit the effectiveness of online learning.

Despite these improvements, interviewees consistently stressed that online learning was not equivalent to face-to-face education. Participants described visible declines in educational quality, particularly in subjects such as mathematics and languages.

Increasing Dropout Rates

Increasing school dropout rates emerged as another major theme throughout the interviews. As of 2024, both Syria and Lebanon had ~22% primary-age children out of school (Save the Children, 2024). Most recent conflicts compounded Lebanon's challenging education situation, which had already left over 500,000 children out of school after years of economic strife, teacher strikes and the impact of Covid-19 (UNICEF, 2025).

Participants repeatedly linked rising dropout rates to worsening economic conditions, repeated educational disruption, and broader instability affecting families across Lebanon. Many parents increasingly felt forced to send children to work instead of school in order to support household

income. On top of that, rising transportation costs prevented some students from attending school regularly.

The issue of transportation became particularly severe after increases in fuel prices. Even when transportation remained partially subsidised, many families could no longer afford school bus fees.

Interviewees also described how repeated disruptions to education created uncertainty regarding whether schools would remain operational, making sustained educational engagement increasingly difficult.

Displacement further complicated continuity of education. Students unable to attend their usual schools often attempted to enrol temporarily in schools closer to shelters or displacement locations, creating additional instability and interruptions. Interviewees stressed that this issue was becoming increasingly difficult to reverse due to the prolonged nature of Lebanon's overlapping crises.

Mental Health and Education

Mental health emerged as one of the most significant cross-cutting themes throughout the research.

Interviewees repeatedly connected educational disruption with broader psychological exhaustion affecting both students and teachers.

Rym Dada-Husseini, who is also a Computer Graphics lecturer at University of Balamand, described how current students lacked the enthusiasm, motivation, and engagement seen in previous generations. According to the participant, students had experienced so many years of disruption that many no longer believed in future stability or employment opportunities. Israel-Hesbollah conflict has further deepened the education crisis in which children have lost up to 60% of schooling in 6 years (University of Cambridge, 2024).

Several participants emphasised that effective learning requires stability, consistency, and psychological security, all of which have been repeatedly undermined in Lebanon over recent years.

Interviewees described the cumulative impact of overlapping crises including the economic collapse, Covid-19, the Beirut explosion, and the current conflict, explaining that there had never been enough time to recover from one crisis before another emerged.

Balsam Gharib described the psychological burden of continuing daily life under the constant threat of bombing. One particularly striking example referenced a university lecture during which a bomb struck nearby, and a student, recording a video of the lecture, was heard screaming for their mother. Situation was described as representative of the level of fear students and educators currently experience.

Several interviewees noted that children were becoming increasingly normalised to war-related violence and sonic bombs, explaining that children now react to sonic bombs as if they are ordinary events, despite the psychological stress they cause.

Participants also described visible signs of exhaustion across society more broadly. Rym Dada-Husseini stated that many people had begun relying on medications such as Valium due to chronic stress and anxiety. Rym has also discussed the emotional impact on children growing up entirely within crisis conditions from the perspective of being a mother. She recalled her twelve-year-old child asking why everything had become bad once he became old enough to understand what was happening around him.

Interviewees additionally connected the Covid-19 period to declines in social interaction and emotional intelligence among children, arguing that a generation raised during repeated crises often struggles to imagine stable futures.

At the same time, participants noted increasing recognition among NGOs and humanitarian organisations that education cannot be separated from mental health and psychosocial support.

Universities, Youth Aspirations, and Brain Drain

Another recurring theme throughout the interviews was the growing desire among young people to leave Lebanon in search of stability abroad.

Participants repeatedly stated that students increasingly viewed studying abroad not necessarily as academically superior, but as psychologically safer and more stable.

Rym Dada-Husseini described how her eldest daughter moved to Canada specifically because she no longer wanted to continue living under conditions of instability and uncertainty.

Participants also explained that prestigious Lebanese universities, which had historically attracted large numbers of local students, had increasingly shifted toward online learning during the conflict, discouraging students from remaining in the country.

Several interviewees observed clear differences between generations of students. University lecturers described younger generations as having weaker educational foundations, particularly in mathematics and languages, due to repeated interruptions to schooling and the limitations of online learning.

Participants also stressed that students increasingly lacked confidence regarding employment prospects inside Lebanon. According to interviewees, many students viewed emigration as their only realistic path toward professional stability.

At the same time, interviewees highlighted structural issues within Lebanon's labour market. One participant described a major mismatch between labour supply and labour demand, arguing that Lebanese society still strongly encourages careers such as law, medicine, and engineering despite limited domestic opportunities in these sectors.

Vocational education was also described as heavily stigmatised, often being associated with academic failure rather than practical professional development.

Participants additionally noted that the economic crisis had severely affected teachers themselves. Many educators had left Lebanon due to low salaries and worsening living conditions, creating further strain on educational institutions. Additionally, teachers have had previously tried to protest their low salaries stemming from economic collapse, but due to life-threatening conflicts emerging, issue is now not spoken about.

Relationship Between Lebanon and Syria

The educational systems of Lebanon and Syria are deeply interconnected through displacement and migration.

Lebanon has hosted large numbers of Syrian refugees for over a decade, creating major pressure on public education systems while simultaneously generating new educational needs.

Interviewees explained that Syrian refugee children in Lebanon frequently experienced interrupted schooling due to displacement, instability, language barriers, and difficulties accessing formal education.

One major issue identified by Carol Abdul-Khalek, working at UNHCR Lebanon, heavily focused on Syrian refugees in the country, was language. Syrian schools operate primarily in Arabic, whereas Lebanese public education often uses English or French as instructional languages. Carol explained that many Syrian refugee children struggled to adapt to these linguistic differences, contributing to low enrolment and high dropout rates.

Nooramaria Parikka described how Lebanese public schools introduced separate morning and afternoon shifts, with Lebanese students typically attending in the morning and Syrian refugee students attending afternoon sessions in schools with capability of organising those sessions. In addition to formal schooling, NGOs and UN agencies developed non-formal educational programmes designed to help out-of-school children eventually transition back into formal education systems as well as re-introduce children who have dropped out to any kind of education, even if informal.

The report also focuses on Syrian refugees who have recently begun returning to Syria. Carol Abdul-Khalek emphasised that return migration does not automatically resolve educational disruption.

Participants described ongoing efforts by Lebanese and Syrian ministries of education to facilitate the transfer of educational certificates and academic records between the two countries in order to support smoother reintegration into Syrian schools.

Several interviewees also highlighted how humanitarian organisations, e.g. UNHCR, increasingly operate regionally across Lebanon and Syria rather than treating educational issues as isolated national problems.

Interestingly, some participants observed that many Syrian returnees who had previously lived in Lebanon later became involved in NGO work, community initiatives, and educational support projects in Syria itself. Interviewees described this as a form of social activism shaped by their own experiences as refugees.

Participants additionally noted a strong sense of Syrian nationalism and motivation among returnees, many of whom expressed a desire to rebuild their country and contribute to post-conflict recovery.

Syria

The education system in Syria has been heavily affected by more than fifteen years of conflict, resulting in widespread disruption to schooling, infrastructure, and educational continuity. As of 2025, 2.45M children are out of school, more than 7,000 schools are damaged or destroyed, 28% of schools do not meet safety standards, 38% do not meet water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) standards (SARD, 2025).

Carol Abdul-Khalek explained that many children across Syria experienced prolonged interruptions to formal education, leaving major gaps within an entire generation's educational development.

At the same time, participants also identified emerging signs of recovery in certain parts of the country. 2025 marked the first time since the conflict began that a standardised national curriculum and calendar had again been implemented across the country (UNICEF, 2025). However, participants stressed that Syria remains politically fragmented and educational conditions still vary heavily depending on region.

Damascus was repeatedly described as significantly more stable than other areas of Syria. According to interviewees, schools and universities in Damascus were often able to continue functioning more consistently throughout the conflict compared to other governorates.

Participants also highlighted major infrastructural challenges within Syria, particularly regarding electricity shortages and unequal access to resources between urban and rural areas.

Several interviewees argued that Syria currently possesses stronger educational infrastructure than Lebanon, despite the destruction caused by war. Participants explained that Syria's more centralised public education system allowed some institutions to continue operating even during periods of conflict.

Interviewees additionally described a growing sense of optimism among some Syrians who now believe the conflict may eventually come to an end.

At the same time, participants stressed that access to higher education among Syrian refugees remained extremely limited. Carol Abdul-Khalek noted that only a very small percentage of refugees globally manage to access university education.

Scholarship programmes such as DAFI were repeatedly referenced as important but highly limited opportunities for refugee students.

NGO and Humanitarian Sector (Lebanon and Syria)

Across both Lebanon and Syria, NGOs and humanitarian organisations play a central role in supporting access to education during periods of crisis.

Interviewees working within humanitarian organisations described a growing shift toward integrated approaches combining education with mental health support, protection services, shelter assistance, nutrition, and recreational activities.

Rym Dada-Husseining described Rotary Club's practical support initiatives within schools functioning as shelters, including providing hot showers, hygiene items such as toothbrushes, and water filtration systems.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the importance of community solidarity and mutual support within Lebanese society during periods of crisis.

Nooramaria Parikka, whose role includes ensuring different NGOs actions do not overlap and help is provided across all spectrum and regions, described NGOs putting a big emphasis on informal education: multiservice community centres providing education, psychosocial support, recreational activities, nutrition services, and outreach programmes aimed at helping vulnerable children return to education.

Nooramaria also explained that NGOs increasingly focused on educational support within shelters, although this initially faced resistance because education was not considered sufficiently "life-saving" compared to other humanitarian priorities. Over time, however, ministries and humanitarian coordinators gradually developed clearer frameworks allowing NGOs to provide educational and recreational support inside shelters.

Participants working at UNICEF and UNHCR also described broader institutional changes within the humanitarian sector itself. Previously, especially in 2011 when a first cluster of Syrian refugees came into Lebanon, the response, including educational sector's response was led by UNHCR. In the recent years, as part of a 'humanitarian reset' education mandate shifted from being shared between UNICEF and UNHCR toward solely UNICEF while UNHCR focused more heavily on refugee relocation and durable solutions. That, however, came with a decrease of combined donor pool dedicated for education sector.

Nooramaria Parikka brought up the Lebanon response plan stating that NGOs actions were supposed to shift from humanitarian to more development based, moving onto cooperation framework from a very sector divided one. With crises coming one after another that has been challenging. UN, however, appreciates the fragile context of Lebanon and currently focuses on how to make help more focused on system strengthening development, i.e. trying to make the system more resilient and moving onto development approach step by step but at the same time adapting to Lebanon's reality of instability and continuous crises.

At the same time the UN is finalising a more generic return strategy of Syrians, i.e. transfer of their certificates, accreditation, in order to ensure a smooth transition into Syrian education system. Action is supported both by Lebanese and Syrian funds; Lebanese supporting the return and Syrian supporting the transition once in Syria.

Conclusion

This report has examined access to education in crisis-affected Middle Eastern countries, focusing specifically on Lebanon, Syria, and the relationship between them through displacement and migration.

The findings demonstrate that educational disruption is one of the most significant yet frequently overlooked consequences of prolonged instability in the region. Educational challenges are shaped by the interaction of conflict, displacement, infrastructural collapse, economic crisis, political instability, and broader humanitarian pressures.

The interview material further demonstrates that educational disruption extends far beyond school closures alone. It affects mental health, social mobility, employment prospects, future aspirations, community stability, and broader questions of national recovery.

The research highlights the widening inequality between public and private education systems in Lebanon, particularly as public schools increasingly function as shelters while private institutions retain greater capacity to continue operating.

The findings also show how repeated crises including the economic collapse, Covid-19 pandemic, Beirut explosion, and ongoing conflict have created cumulative educational disruption over multiple years.

At the same time, the report identifies important examples of adaptation and resilience. These include the evolution of remote learning from improvised WhatsApp-based teaching methods toward more structured government-supported systems, increasing NGO involvement in education within shelters and displacement settings, and gradual signs of educational recovery within parts of Syria.

Overall, while the challenges facing education in Lebanon and Syria remain severe, the research demonstrates that educational systems in crisis contexts are defined not only by disruption, but also by continuous efforts to maintain, adapt, and gradually rebuild access to learning under extremely difficult conditions.

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- Carol Abdul-Khalek – Durable Solutions Associate at UNHCR Lebanon
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