GROWING UP IN THE WORLD'S MOST DANGE

Amna al-Khodr was 13 when Syria's civil war broke out. Now she and

by Hania Mourtada in Lebanon

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The city of Homs, Syria, is in ruins as a result of intense fighting between government and rebel forces.

ROUS PLACE

her family are among the millions of refugees caught in the crossfire.

Amna al-Khodr was once a typical Syrian teen. She loved shopping with friends, surfing the Web, and decorating her large bedroom. She lived in a middle-class home in Yarmouk, a suburb of Damascus, Syria's capital. She looked forward to going to college to study computer science.

The Khodrs are devoted Muslims, and Amna covers her hair with a head scarf. Even so, she enjoyed a degree of freedom in Syria that is not always available to women in conservative Muslim countries. She was allowed to wear makeup and stay out until sunset. Neighbors left their doors open for visitors. Syria was considered one of the safest countries in the Middle East.

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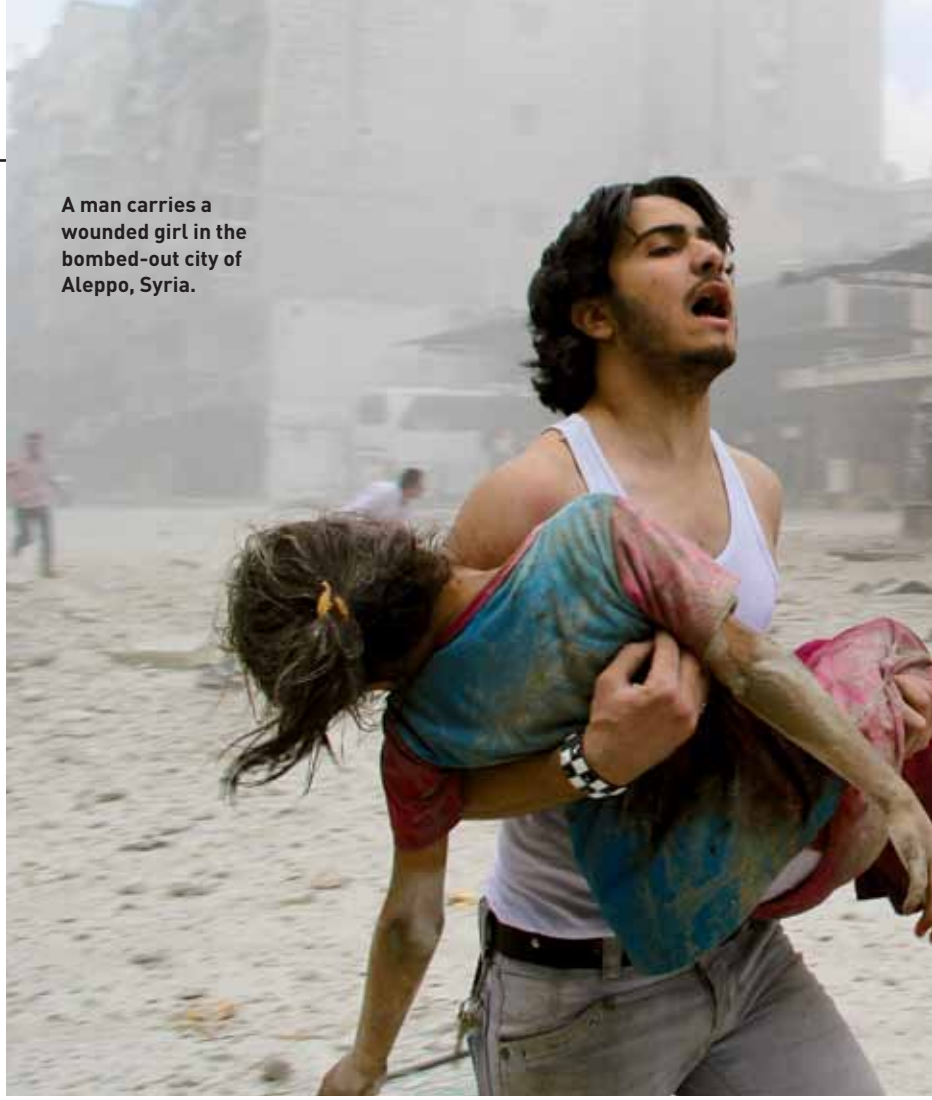
©STRINGER/GHASSAN NAJJAR/REUTERS (BACKGROUND); KATE BROOKS/REDUX PICTURES (AMNA); JIM MCMAHON (GLOBE)



A man carries a wounded girl in the bombed-out city of Aleppo, Syria.

Then, in 2011, 13-year-old Amna found herself surrounded by violent and unpredictable forces. Syria was overcome by civil war. Amna's tight-knit community became sharply divided by political loyalties. People who supported President Bashar al-Assad clashed with people who wanted to force the longtime dictator out of office.

Amna's family thought they could get through the crisis by not taking sides. They went about their lives as best they could. But in late 2012, rebels swept into their neighborhood. Then government forces increased attacks against the rebels. Amna's nightmare had begun.

Armed rebel groups roamed the streets. They stole food and harassed Amna and other girls. But Assad's forces were more brutal. They used bombs, air strikes, and even chemical weapons to try to crush the rebellion. Amna's neighborhood was reduced to rubble. Her cousin and some friends died in the attacks.

Amna, her two younger brothers, and their parents fled for their lives. "Air strikes do not discriminate between civilians and militants," she tells *JS*. "We never took sides in this war. But of course that isn't enough to shield you."

The Khodrs now live in Shatila, a crowded camp for **refugees** in neighboring Lebanon. They are crammed into a small, windowless room lit by a single candle. Outside in the streets, violence erupts between rival gangs and thugs. Rats scurry in the filthy alleys between crumbling buildings.

Amna, now 17, tries to be thankful. "I don't like to whine, because my family members escaped this senseless war unharmed," she says. "But I don't know how we are going to survive here."

Millions Displaced

Since the conflict in Syria began, more than 160,000 people have been killed, and 2.5 million have fled to neighboring countries. Another 6.5 million have been displaced inside Syria.

Amna and her brothers are part of what is now referred to as Syria's "lost generation." At least half the refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and other countries in the region are children. Many no longer attend school.

The crisis has become a terrible human crisis, with suffering unlike

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad

BARAA AL-HALABI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (TOP); © YOUSSEF BADAWI/EPA/CORBIS (BOTTOM)

Words to Know

- **refugee** *(n)*: a person forced to flee his or her country because of danger or persecution
- **Arab Spring** *(n)*: a series of revolts in Arab countries in spring 2011

Sunni & Shia

Islam's Long Feud

The prophet Muhammad, Islam's founder, died in 632 A.D. Shortly afterward, a dispute broke out among his followers over who would succeed him. Most chose to follow Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr. They became the Sunni. Others followed Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali. They became Shia.

Both Sunni and Shia worship Allah (God). They also believe that the Koran is the word of God as told to Muhammad. A key difference between them is that Shia believe in a divine leader who will return at the end of time. Many Sunni think this violates Islam.

Today, Sunnis make up about 85 percent of Muslims worldwide. Shia Muslims make up about 10 percent.

anything in recent history, according to António Guterres. He is the United Nations (U.N.) High Commissioner for Refugees.

Huge tent cities have been set up in Turkey and Jordan to house hundreds of thousands of people. Some camps tend to flood, and sewage seeps from the ground.

How It Began

Syria's civil war began as part of the **Arab Spring** in 2011. First came a series of protests against President Assad, whose family has held harsh control over the country for 44 years. Thousands of peaceful demonstrators took to the streets calling for Assad to resign. As Assad's security forces cracked down on them, armed rebels replaced peaceful protesters.

Syria is a multiethnic society. Like the Khodrs, the majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims. *(See "Islam's Long Feud," above.)* But for decades the government has been controlled by Alawites, a group of people with roots in Shia Islam. As the violence increased in the country, armed Sunni and Shia groups from around the Middle East streamed into Syria. Many have terrorist ties.

This spring, the civil war spread beyond Syria's borders into neighboring countries.

A radical Sunni Muslim group called ISIS seized vast areas of northwestern Iraq and northern Syria. *(See map, pp. 12-13.)* ISIS is short for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The group's goal is to establish a country governed by strict Islamic law. ISIS uses harsh terrorist tactics. They torture opponents. They also have killed large groups of Shia Muslims.

ISIS's roots can be traced back to Al Qaeda. That is the terrorist organization that carried out the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States. More than 3,000 people in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C., were killed in those attacks.

World leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama, fear that Syria's conflict could engulf the entire Middle East.

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Syrian refugees at a camp in Turkey

OZAN KOSE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (PHOTO); JIM MCMAHON/MAPMAN® (MAP)

"We are possibly on the [edge] of a regional war," says U.N. official Vitit Muntarbhorn.

A wider Mideast war could have a direct effect on the U.S. If the Iraqi government collapses under ISIS, Iraq could become a terrorist training ground, with the U.S. as a target. In addition, America's allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, and Israel, could be drawn into or threatened by the chaos.

There are also economic concerns. Iraq is a major oil producer. A continuing conflict there could cause the price of oil to spike. That could hurt the U.S. economy.

The refugee crisis is another thing that makes the region less stable. Lebanon's government has refused to build new refugee camps. That forces the 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon to live wherever they can: in overcrowded apartments, stables, and makeshift camps.

Making the Best of It

For Amna, the future looks anything but steady. She has little hope of returning to Syria. She expects the violence to last for years to come. Even so, she's trying to remain optimistic about her life in Lebanon, a nation she never expected to call home. She hasn't been to school in two years, but she is taking free classes in English. She needs to learn it in case she finds a spot in a high school in Lebanon. Amna's father wants her to finish school. He still hopes that she'll become a computer scientist.

A sense of lawlessness exists around the camp, but Amna says that's a far cry from the utter destruction in Syria. At least there are no bombs, no air strikes, no tanks.

"If we stay close as a family," Amna says, "we can make the best of our situation here."

YOUR TURN

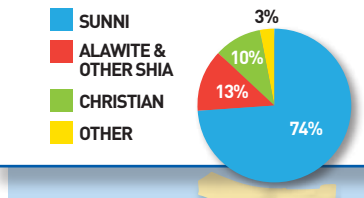
If you could interview Amna, what would you ask her? Write five questions and their possible answers.

MAPSEARCH

A Region in Crisis

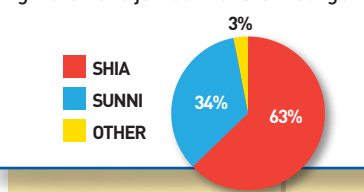
Syria

The Alawite clan of President Assad has ties to Shia Islam. ISIS began as one of the groups fighting to oust Assad in Syria's civil war. Since then, the extremist Sunni group has spread its reach deep into Iraq.



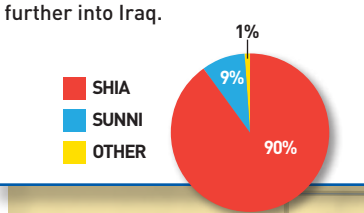
Iraq

Under former dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq's minority Sunni Muslims dominated the Shia majority. The mostly Shia government that took over when Saddam was ousted by the U.S. and its allies in 2003 has alienated Iraqi Sunnis. Some of Saddam's former fighters have joined the ISIS insurgency.



Iran

The U.S. has long been concerned about Iran's nuclear program and its support of Shia extremist groups—as well as the government of Bashar al-Assad. Now both the U.S. and Iran want to stop ISIS as it reaches further into Iraq.



SOURCES: Estimates of religious breakdowns based on data from CIA and PBS

The civil war in Syria is raging beyond its borders, fueled by the ancient divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims. An extremist group called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) wants to establish a separate Sunni state in the region. It now controls a large swath of northern Syria and northwestern Iraq.

Questions

1. What is the capital of Syria?
2. The Shatila camp is near which capital?
3. The insurgent group ISIS holds territory in which two countries?
4. The spread of ISIS threatens which capital?
5. Which country has the highest percentage of Shia Muslims—Syria, Iraq, or Iran?
6. In which of those three countries are Sunni Muslims dominant?
7. Which of those countries has a significant Christian minority?
8. What two major rivers meet in Iraq?
9. Which city lies on the 50°N latitude line?
10. About how far did Amna's family travel from Yarmouk to Shatila?

Growing up in the World's Most Dangerous Place

1. What overcame Syria in 2011?

2. Two groups emerged: those who supported President _____ and those who wanted to force the longtime dictator out of office.
3. In 2012 _____ who supported getting rid of the dictator swept into neighborhoods. But forces that supported the President were more brutal using bombs, _____, and even _____ to crush the rebellion.
4. Since the conflict began more than _____ people have been killed and _____ have fled to neighboring countries. Anther _____ have been displaced within Syria.
5. How has the civil war become a human crisis?

6. Syria's civil war started as part of _____ in the year _____.
7. The majority of Syria is _____ Muslim even though the government is controlled by the _____ Muslims. As the violence escalated both have terrorist ties.
8. _____ percentage of the Muslim world is Sunni and _____ percentage of the Muslim world is made up of Shia.
9. The radical Sunni Muslim group _____ which stands for _____took over parts of Iraq and Syria. Their goal is _____ by using _____. This group can be traced back to _____ who carried out the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001.
10. What are 2 ways the collapse of the Iraqi government could impact the United States?