

# ESCAPE FROM HELL

**Amna al-Khodr, 17, is one of the millions of Syrian refugees caught in the crossfire of a brutal civil war**

BY HANIA MOURTADA IN BEIRUT



**Devastation in Syria:** The Damascus suburb of Yarmouk (*below*), where Amna lived, has been reduced to rubble. A man carries a wounded girl in the bombed-out city of Aleppo (*above*).





**A**mna al-Khodr was a typical Syrian high school kid. She loved shopping with friends, decorating her room, and surfing the Web. She looked forward to going to college to study computer science.

The Khodr family had a three-bedroom apartment in Yarmouk, a middle-class suburb of Damascus, Syria's capital. Amna's father, who owned a supermarket chain, often drove the family to the countryside on weekends for picnics. Neighbors left their doors open for visitors, and Syria was considered one of the safest countries in the Middle East.

Then civil war broke out in 2011 and everything changed. Before long, the tight-knit community Amna had grown up in became sharply divided by political loyalties—those who supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad versus those who wanted to oust the longtime dictator.

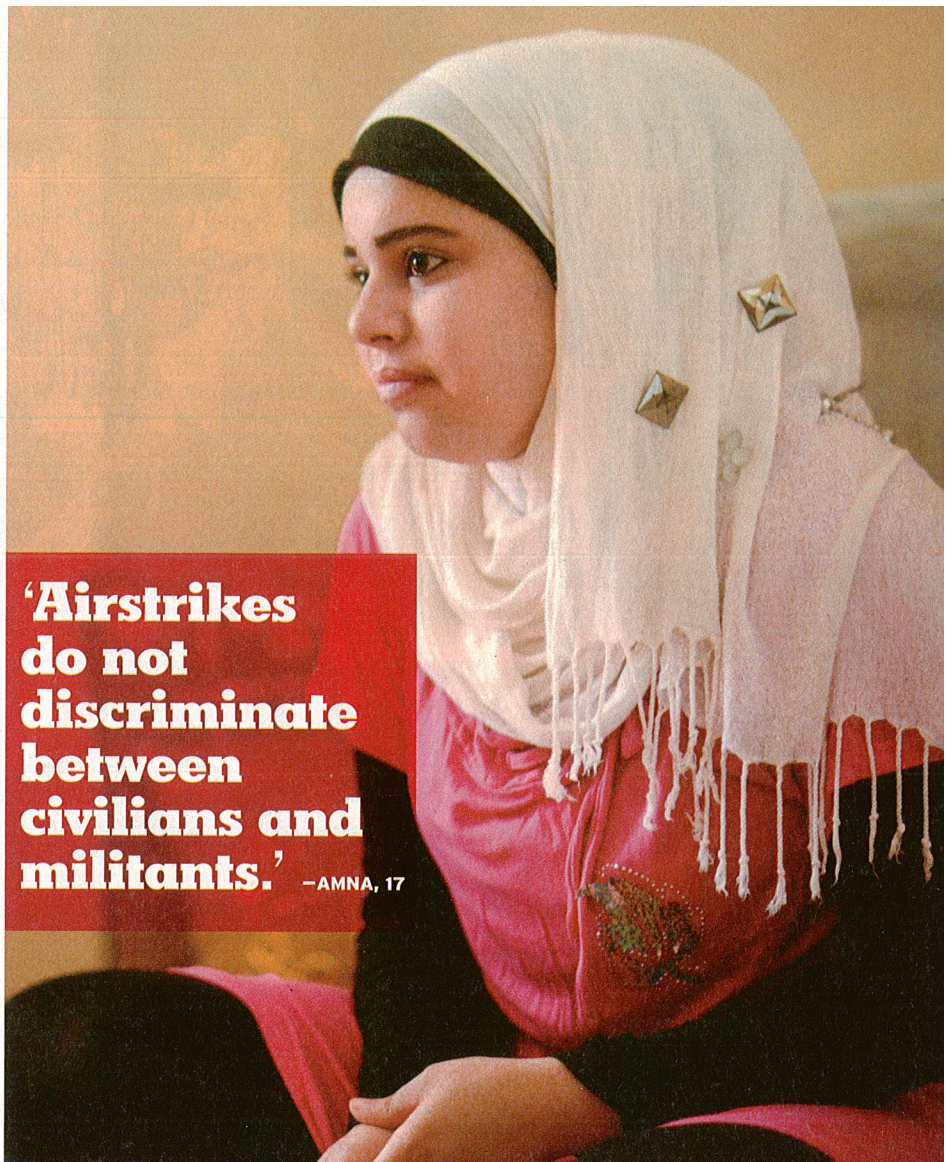
At first, Amna's family decided to stay put. They thought they could weather the crisis by keeping their heads down. For a while, calm prevailed in Yarmouk. But late in 2012, rebels swept into the neighborhood and government forces ratcheted up attacks to put down the rebellion. Amna's nightmare had begun.

"Airstrikes do not discriminate between civilians and militants," she says. "We never took sides in this war, but of course this isn't enough to shield you."

Amna found herself thrust into a violent and unpredictable world. Some rebel groups stole from people and harassed them, but Amna recalls that the Assad regime was far more brutal: Using bombs, airstrikes, tanks, and snipers, it carried out a policy of violent oppression.

When rebels tightened their hold over Yarmouk, Assad's military sealed off the neighborhood and restricted who went in and out and how much food they could bring back.

To buy bread for her family each day, Amna had to cross government



**'Airstrikes do not discriminate between civilians and militants.'** —AMNA, 17

checkpoints: Soldiers set up barricades, looking for rebels wanted by the regime. Often, the soldiers insulted Amna and took away her groceries to feed their forces.

"I have never been the pliant type, so at times I would talk back—especially when they confiscated my pita bread," says Amna. "But my mother told me my bravado could get me killed in an instant."

In the summer of 2013, the shelling of Yarmouk intensified. At the same time, the Khodrs heard that a young girl had been detained at a checkpoint and raped by soldiers. Amna's family decided it was time to flee.

Since the civil war began, 200,000

Syrians have been killed and 3 million have escaped to neighboring countries. Another 6.5 million Syrians have been displaced inside Syria.

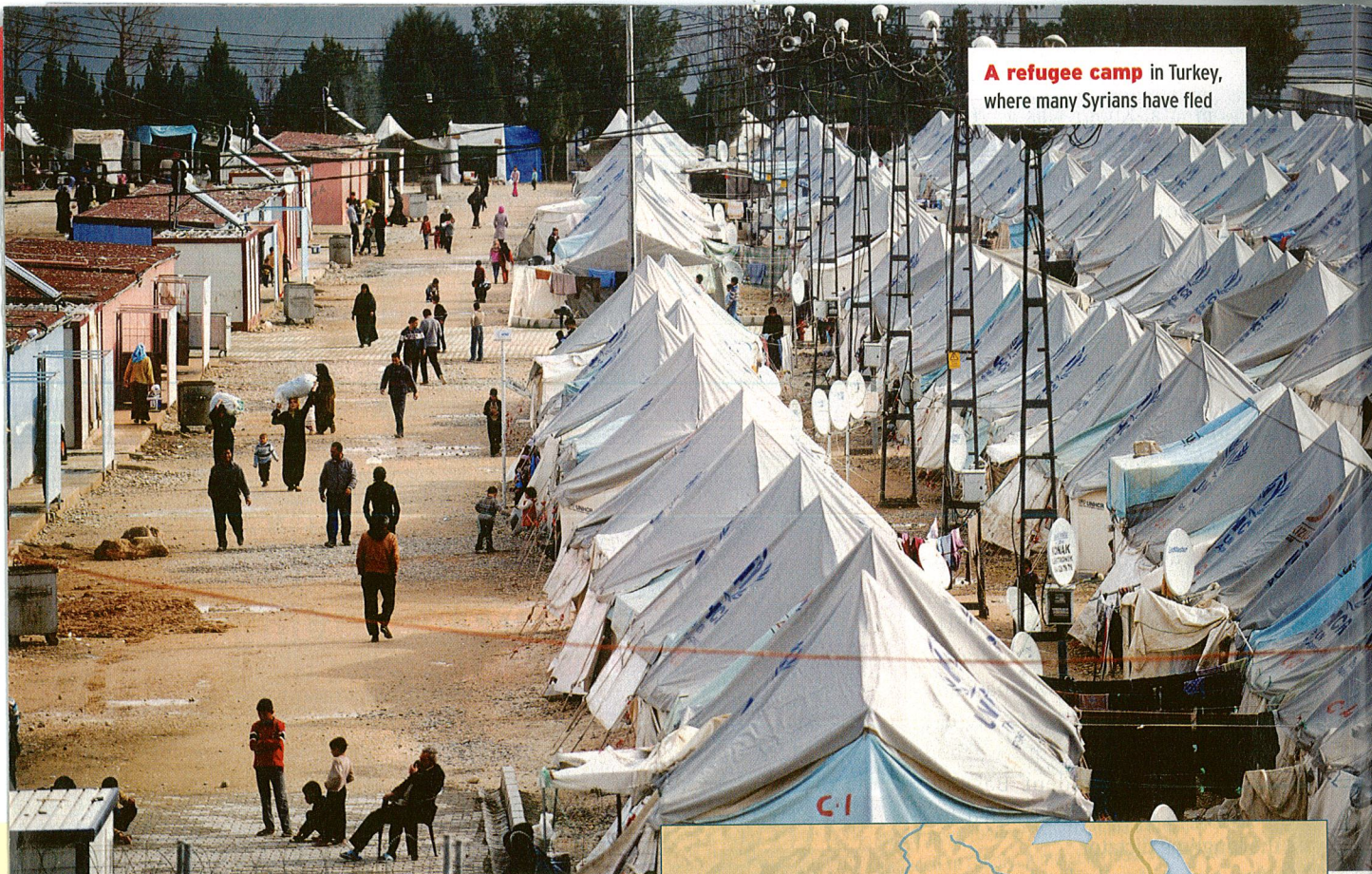
### **A 'Lost Generation'**

Amna and her brothers are part of what is now referred to as Syria's "lost generation." At least half of the 3 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan are children. Two-thirds of those children—in addition to some 3 million children who are displaced inside Syria—no longer attend school.

The Syrian refugee crisis is a massive nationwide humanitarian problem. Huge tent cities have been set up in Turkey and Jordan to accommodate hundreds of thousands of people. Some camps are prone to flooding and have

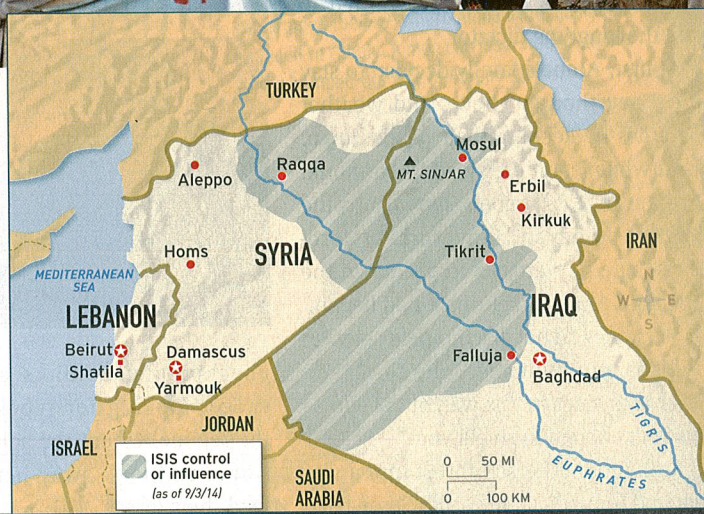
 To learn more about the Syrian civil war and the militant group ISIS, watch two videos at [www.upfrontmagazine.com](http://www.upfrontmagazine.com)





## A Region in Crisis

The United Nations calls Syria the “biggest humanitarian emergency of our era.” Millions of refugees escaping the civil war have fled to neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. The rise of the militant group ISIS, which has taken over big chunks of Iraq and Syria (see map at left and box, facing page), has only complicated efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict.



raw sewage all around. In Lebanon, the government has refused to build new refugee camps, so the 1.1 million Syrian refugees there live wherever they can: overcrowded apartments, stables, and makeshift camps.

Amna, now 17, lives with her parents and two younger brothers in a refugee camp in Lebanon. They’re crammed together in a windowless 10-by-10-foot room, lit only by a flickering candle. Danger lurks outside in the form of rival gangs and sometimes snipers. Increasingly, school

looks like a faint dream.

“I don’t like to whine because my family members escaped this senseless war unharmed,” says Amna. “But I don’t know how we’re going to survive here.”

Amna’s family settled in Shatila, an old refugee camp on the southern fringes of Beirut that was originally set up in 1949 for Palestinian refugees from the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the decades since, it’s evolved into an urban slum.

About 15,000 Syrian refugees live in Shatila. The dilapidated houses have no plumbing and intermittent electricity.

The streets are ruled by gangs of petty criminals and drug dealers, and by rival militant groups that occasionally put snipers on rooftops to protect their turf. Sometimes, people are shot dead over small things.

Amna walks down narrow alleys between crumbling buildings trying to avoid the thugs who taunt and harass her. There’s a sense of lawlessness, but it’s a far cry from the wholesale destruction taking place back in Syria. Here, at least, there are no airstrikes, no barrel bombs, and no tanks.



Still, Amna worries that her brother might get recruited by one of the criminal gangs, so she watches him closely.

### How It All Began

The conflict in Syria began as part of the Arab Spring in 2011 with a series of protests against Assad, whose family has ruled the country with an iron fist for 44 years. The Assad regime shot at peaceful protesters and arrested hundreds of dissidents. Civilians fought back and the situation soon spiraled out of control. Before long, the uprising evolved into a bloody civil war.

Syria is a complex multiethnic society. The majority of Syrians (including Amna's family) are Sunni Muslims, but for decades the positions of power within the government have been held by Alawites, a Shiite sect that includes the Assad family. As the violence escalated, various armed groups emerged, many of them fighting along sectarian lines.

The situation has been further complicated by the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), one of the most militant groups battling Assad. ISIS now controls large swaths of territory in western Syria and northern Iraq, and is ruling those areas as a strict Islamic state, or caliphate. The United States now says it will intervene to contain the group (*see box*).

Amna has already missed two years of school, and her 14-year-old brother was recently forced to drop out and get a job to help cover the family's living expenses. Lebanon is such a small country that there's simply no room in its public schools for vast numbers of Syrian refugees. Then there's the problem of the curriculum: In Lebanon, classes are taught in both Arabic and English, but most Syrian schoolchildren don't learn English at all, so they're unprepared even if they can find a spot.

### Amna's Future

Amna has been taking free English classes three times a week so that if she gets into a Lebanese high school, she'll be prepared. Her father, who

still hopes she'll become a computer scientist, wants her to finish school. But the idea of going to college looks more unrealistic with each day. Her more pragmatic mother thinks marriage to a Lebanese man might give Amna a more stable future.

Right now, the future looks anything but stable. Amna has little hope of

returning to Syria. Her old neighborhood is in ruins and she expects the violence to last for years to come. Despite the long odds, she's trying to remain optimistic about her life in a nation she never expected to call home.

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

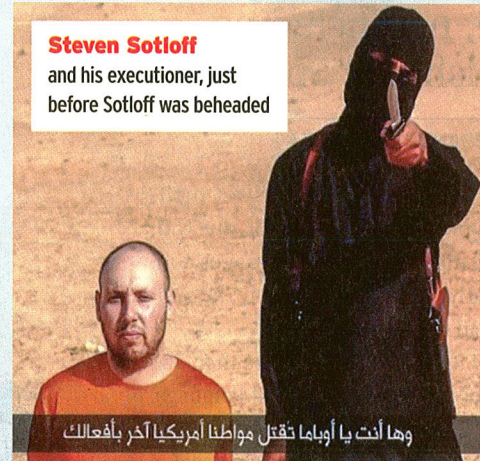
## How Involved Will the U.S. Get?

After struggling for three years to avoid direct military involvement in Syria's civil war, President Obama authorized U.S. airstrikes in Syria last month. The airstrikes will target the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the most militant of the groups fighting to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Rapid territorial gains by ISIS and the group's recent beheadings of two American journalists convinced Obama that avoiding military action in Syria was no longer an option. ISIS posted videos online showing the gruesome executions of James Foley, 40, and Steven Sotloff, 31.

"We will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are," Obama said. "That means I will not hesitate to take action against [ISIS] in Syria, as well as Iraq."

The shift in American strategy raises several questions. Will Arab governments in the region support U.S. intervention? What can the U.S. achieve and how involved is it willing



to get? Obama vows he won't send ground troops back to the Middle East. It's been almost three years since he withdrew the last U.S. troops from Iraq, ending a war that killed nearly 4,500 Americans.

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But not stopping Islamic militants in Syria could be costly if they gain the ability to attack outside the region. Young American extremists, mostly in their late teens or early 20s, have already

gone to Syria to fight. In May, an American from Florida carried out a suicide bombing in Syria. More than 100 Americans have now joined ISIS, whose battlefield victories and sleek Internet presence have helped it recruit thousands of outsiders.

The idea that a small but growing number of Americans have embraced anti-American Islamic extremism has raised concerns that they could bring the fight here.

"We have Americans with travel documents," says Congressman Michael McCaul of Texas, "that can come back to the United States and perpetrate an act of terrorism."

—Patricia Smith