

'We are the generation/Who has grown old too soon': The children of Syria speak

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Beirut

“Yes, we are children, but we bear the burden of grown men.” The words of Aisha Al-Mohamad, 13, from Raqqa, Syria, translated from Arabic, encapsulate “Haneen,” a new bilingual book-cum-exhibition from UNICEF Lebanon.

“Haneen,” which means “yearning” or “nostalgia,” brings together 39 artists to interpret poems and stories by Syrian refugee children in the camps of Lebanon.

“We are the generation/whose laughter you took away /and sowed oppression,” writes Waad al-Zouhour, 14, from Homs. “We are the generation/Who has grown old too soon.”

UNICEF will take the exhibition on international tour, which is why it has purposely used light materials.

Accompanying Waad’s Arabic text is a painting by 24-year-old Lebanese Ivan Debs, depicting a dead or dying child whose blood forms a figure of defiance.

In another poem, Waad remembers a doll she left behind when woken by her father and told they were leaving immediately. She asks: “Is my doll suffering from war like I suffer from being a refugee? Did my doll grow up too early, like I did?”

The “longing” of Haneen is a nostalgia never associated with children. Some of the art depicts violence. For instance, Debs’ painting or one by Jad Saber of a child peering across a ruined city



Lost childhood. Noura Badran, watercolour, based on the poem “Childhood” by Aisha al-Mohamad.

(Haneen)

as jets come in for an attack.

Some simply reflect what is missed. A poem by Zohoor Haidar, 13, from Daraa, calls Syria and Lebanon “two Jasmynes/filled with love and tenderness/helping one another.” It has inspired an installation from Aida Kawas, from Beirut, of a Damascene shell-work display-chest full of beloved items. These include pieces for barjees

(a game popular in Syria played on a small cloth “board”), children’s blue bracelets to ward off the evil eye, buttons and a knitted Damascene rose.

“Haneen” project manager Soha Bsat Boustani said the project evolved from work by NGO partner Beyond Association in offering psychological support for children in camps through reading, writing, singing and dancing.

“As children began showing me their work, it was so overwhelming that something needed to be done,” said Boustani, who has worked for UNICEF for 35 years, most recently as a consultant. “A colleague, Salam al-Janabi, now in Syria, and I brainstormed and together with Chadi Aoun [project curator] we decided to involve Lebanese and Syrian artists.”

The link between the “two jasmynes” centred the project.

“From the beginning, with the words of Syrian children, we wanted the artwork to be Syrian and Lebanese,” said Boustani. “Many of the Lebanese artists – not all of them, there are 25 – had lived the war in Lebanon.”

Each artist was sent three poems or texts and asked to pick one. Once the book and accompanying postcards were printed, the exhibition opened on February 20 in Beit Beirut. The building has symbolic significance. It is used for exhibitions by a municipality that was notorious in the Lebanon war as a snipers’ nest at the Sodeco crossing on the green

line that separated largely Muslim western Beirut from Christian eastern sectors.

“We insisted on having Beit Beirut because of what it symbolises,” said Boustani, “thereby putting the two generations of war, and two nationalities, speaking in one voice, in this landmark. The cruelty of war has affected Lebanese and Syrians alike.”

This cruelty and trauma are palpable. Ola Mohamad, 11, loved to visit the seaside town of Latakia when she was little but came to hate the sea after the widely pictured drowning of Alan Kurdi in 2015 “chasing the dream of Europe.”

“I blame you Oh, sea/I no longer love you, I will never visit you again/Why did you swallow

my friend?/Are you that hungry that you had to take that beautiful child?”

Many poems depict daily struggles in camps. Maryam al-Mohamad, 12, from Raqqa, describes a life “where the tent’s ceiling nearly touches our hair, we live inside nylon bags and wooden frames, we are packaged goods with a missing ‘MADE IN’ label.”

Abdelwakil al-Ibrahim, 11, from Aleppo, writes a poem of his uncle, killed when he was knocked down by car as he pushed his bicycle selling cotton candy to children. He found no grave because of crowds whose “sharp tongues and insults were harsher than death.”

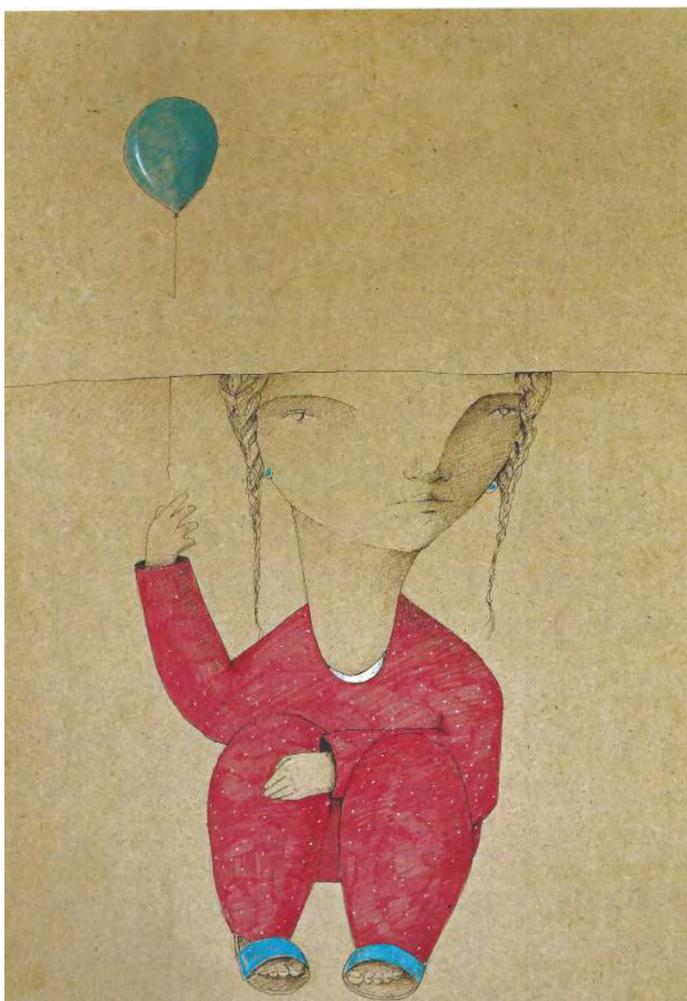
Mohamad Omran, born in Damascus in 1979, paints the uncle in his underwear with his “cotton candy bicycle.” The book’s text says Abdelwakil’s greatest fear is “dying in Lebanon and not getting a proper burial place.”

Boustani said UNICEF has been overwhelmed by the response to the exhibition. “I’ve seen many people crying. Usually, artists produce a painting or sculpture of their own perception. Here the children are in the artwork, this is what’s so strong.”

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Meanwhile, Mohammad Nouri Ali, 12, dreams of going home to Aleppo, where he has left his football, bicycle, a garden of roses and “morning.”

“Our morning never dies/One day, we will return to play/Our morning will be waiting for me/ And I will run towards it and kiss both its cheeks.”



Nostalgic mood. Mohamad Khayata, ink on wood, based on the poem “A Wish” by Yara al-Sofook.

(Haneen)



Palpable trauma. Maya Fidawi, acrylic on paper, based on the poem ‘My Doll’ by Waad al-Zouhour.

(Haneen)