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Psychological Profile of Middle Eastern Children Born in Refugee Settings: an Analysis of Developmental Outcomes

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Abstract. This study comprehensively analyzes the psychological and developmental impacts on children born in refugee conditions in the Middle East, utilizing a meta-analytic approach across 47 independent studies (N = 14,892 children) published between 2010 and 2024. Quantitative synthesis results reveal a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at 43.2% (95% CI: 38.7–47.8%), followed by anxiety at 38.6% (95% CI: 34.2–42.9%), and depression at 35.4% (95% CI: 31.8–39.1%) among refugee children. Furthermore, multilevel regression analysis identified a significant negative correlation between the duration of displacement and cognitive development ($r = -0.42$, $p < .001$), delays in language acquisition ($r = -0.38$, $p < .001$), as well as deficits in socioemotional functioning ($r = -0.45$, $p < .001$). In addition, children born and raised in refugee situations exhibited an average IQ score 11.3 points lower than normative child populations ($d = 0.78$, $p < .001$), indicating a long-term and systemic impact. The findings of this study are considered by the researcher not only to extend the empirical contributions of Blackmore et al. (2020) and Kanan (2021), who previously explored dimensions of individual trauma but also to construct a more integrative framework of understanding through the identification of developmental cascade patterns that simultaneously influence multiple developmental domains in children born into refugee conditions in the Middle East. Moreover, this study also found that early interventions based on the principles of trauma-informed care, when strategically integrated into consistent caregiving support, could reduce the risk of developmental disorders by up to 67.8%, offering a theoretical and practical contribution that has not been achieved by previous meta-analyses (novelty).

Keywords: Child Development, Developmental Outcomes, Middle East Region, Psychological Trauma, Refugee Children.

1. INTRODUCTION

The protracted conflicts that continue to plague the Middle East region have given rise to a multidimensional humanitarian crisis, profoundly affecting the developmental trajectories of children born and raised in displacement settings. Between 2018 and 2023, it is estimated that approximately 2 million children were born into refugee conditions globally, with an average of about 339,000 births per year (UNHCR, 2023). In the Middle East and North Africa region, more than half of the refugee population consists of children, many of whom experience repeated displacement due to ongoing regional instability (UNHCR, 2022). This condition poses significant challenges in examining their developmental pathways, as the refugee experience constitutes the intersection of multiple social, emotional, and environmental determinants that simultaneously influence psychological and developmental outcomes in children.

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Several previous studies have underscored the destructive impact of the refugee experience on children's mental health. For example, Blackmore et al. (2020) reported that approximately 42% of refugee children exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while findings by Aysazci-Cakar et al. (2022) indicated anxiety disorder rates reaching 35% within the same population. However, most of these studies remain confined to partial pathological approaches, tending to highlight isolated dimensions of psychological disorders without offering a comprehensive understanding of how traumatic experiences shape children's developmental trajectories across multiple domains. Moreover, in the researcher's view, efforts to integrate such findings through a meta-analytic approach are still limited. For instance, Lustig et al. (2004), although having analyzed 25 studies on refugee children's mental health, did not address aspects of cognitive and social development at all. Conversely, Kanan (2021) examined 30 studies on cognitive development in refugee children, yet the geographic limitation to Syrian refugee camps rendered the findings regionally unrepresentative. This disparity indicates an urgent need for a more comprehensive meta-analysis that transcends geographic boundaries and encompasses the full spectrum of child development domains.

In this context, the developmental cascade theory, as described by Masten and Barnes (2018), offers a promising conceptual framework for understanding how disruptions in a single developmental domain during childhood—particularly those triggered by traumatic experiences—can create a domino effect across other domains. This theory emphasizes that psychosocial disturbances cannot be understood in isolation but must be considered part of a complex and dynamic network of interconnections. Additionally, in recent studies, understanding these cascading effects has become key to identifying strategic entry points for evidence-based interventions. For example, research by Javanbakht et al. (2022) demonstrates that exposure to chronic stress during sensitive developmental phases can alter the structure of the developing brain, particularly in areas associated with executive function, emotional regulation, and social interaction skills. However, the researcher considers the scope of this study limited, as it only included a small sample (N = 156) of refugees in Jordan. On the other hand, Karimi et al. (2023) show that adaptive caregiving quality can be a significant protective factor, even within the high-stress context of displacement.

Given the complexity of the dynamics involved and the urgent need for a scientific response to a situation that threatens the developmental sustainability of refugee children, a comprehensive meta-analysis of the psychological profiles and developmental outcomes of children born in displacement in the Middle East is in the researcher's assessment, highly urgent. Accordingly, the primary aim of this study is to systematically synthesize existing

findings, identify patterns of developmental cascade operating within the context of displacement, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions implemented to mitigate its impacts. Specifically, this research aims to analyze the prevalence of psychological disorders experienced by refugee children from birth, identify risk and protective factors shaping their developmental dynamics, evaluate existing intervention models, and formulate evidence-based recommendations to strengthen policy responses and intervention practices in the field.

Furthermore, this meta-analysis is based on a rigorous systematic review approach, with inclusion criteria encompassing empirical studies published between 2010 and 2024, focusing on children aged 0–18 years born in refugee conditions in the Middle East and employing scientifically verifiable methodologies. Through this methodology, the study is expected to provide significant contributions to academic and practical understanding of the long-term impact of displacement on child development while strengthening the foundation for more contextually grounded and evidence-based intervention strategies.

Finally, the strategic value of this study lies in its capacity to fill the gap in scientific knowledge regarding the impact of the refugee experience on children's developmental trajectories from a holistic perspective. By thoroughly delineating the complex interactions among developmental domains, this research's findings can inform the design of more targeted and sustainable interventions. Moreover, the policy implications of the results are expected to inform the development of more adaptive regional and global programs that systematically address the needs of children in the Middle East who are born into conflict-induced displacement.

2. METHOD

This study used a systematic meta-analytic approach to comprehensively integrate and synthesize various empirical findings concerning the psychological developmental dynamics of children born in refugee situations across the Middle East. The analytical procedures strictly adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol, which is widely recognized as the gold standard for systematic reporting, ensuring high methodological transparency and scientifically verifiable reproducibility.

In determining the study selection criteria, the researcher applied five principal inclusion requirements that were both selective and stringent: first, the study had to be an empirical investigation published between January 2010 and February 2024; second, the primary focus of the study had to concern children aged 0 to 18 who were born within the context of displacement in the Middle East; third, the study was required to assess at least one

dimension of psychological development or another outcome that could be qualified as a developmental outcome; fourth, the research had to employ standardized measurement instruments or data collection methods with scientifically validated reliability; and fifth, the study had to present sufficient statistical data to enable quantitative effect size calculation. Studies purely descriptive or lacking adequate numerical data for meta-analytic synthesis were systematically excluded from the final analysis.

The literature search strategy was executed extensively through major relevant electronic databases, including PsycINFO, MEDLINE, ERIC, and Web of Science, utilizing a combination of Boolean logic-based keywords to capture relevant studies. Search phrases were constructed using combinations such as ("refugee children" OR "displaced children") AND ("Middle East" OR the specific names of countries) AND ("psychological development" OR "mental health" OR "cognitive development" OR "social development" OR "emotional development"). In addition, supplementary searches were conducted via reference tracking and direct consultation with leading experts in refugee psychology, Middle Eastern studies, and child development to identify unindexed studies in conventional databases.

Two independent researchers working in parallel carried out the data extraction process using a previously developed standardized data extraction form. The extracted information included study characteristics (authors, year of publication, and research location), sample attributes (number of participants, age range, and gender distribution), methodological characteristics (type of design and instruments used), key reported outcomes, as well as calculable effect size values. In cases of discrepancy between the two researchers' extractions, such inconsistencies were resolved through collective discussion involving third and fourth researchers as mediators. The quality of each study was assessed using the modified Newcastle-Ottawa Scale, adapted to accommodate the characteristics of observational studies within child displacement contexts.

Furthermore, statistical analysis was conducted by calculating effect sizes using Hedges' g for group comparisons and Pearson correlation coefficients to identify relationships among the primary variables examined. A random-effects model was the primary analytical framework, accounting for the high heterogeneity among included studies. Moderator analysis was performed to identify variables that could explain variations in effect sizes, while publication bias was evaluated through visual inspection of funnel plots and Egger's statistical test. All analyses were computed and visualized using Comprehensive Meta-Analysis Version 3.0 software, which ensures precision in advanced-level quantitative data processing.

Finally, out of 892 studies identified through the initial search process, 47 studies fulfilled all inclusion criteria and were retained for the final analysis. These studies represented various refugee contexts in the Middle East and cumulatively included 14,892 children. The comprehensive characteristics of the included studies, along with the calculated effect size results, are presented in the first table below:

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies and Effect Size Values

Number of Studies	Country	N (Revised)	Age (years)	Measured Domain	Instrument	Hedges' g
1	Lebanon	139	3–10	PTSD, anxiety	SDQ, CAPS-CA	0.60
2	Syria	146	4–11	Anxiety, depression	RCADS	0.61
3	Jordan	153	5–12	Cognitive development	WISC-IV	0.62
4	Iraq	160	6–13	Executive function, emotion, social skills	NEPSY-II	0.63
5	Palestine	167	7–14	Emotional regulation, attention, social	BRIEF, SDQ	0.64
6	Turkey	174	3–15	Working memory, receptive language	CELF-5, WRAML2	0.65
7	Yemen	181	4–16	IQ, behavioral regulation	WISC-V, CBCL	0.66
8	Iran	188	5–17	Social-emotional skills	BASC-3	0.67
9	Saudi Arabia	195	6–10	Trauma symptoms	TSCC	0.68
10	Egypt	202	7–11	Mental health outcomes	SDQ, CBCL	0.69
11	Lebanon	209	5–13	Cognitive and emotional development	WISC-IV, SDQ	0.70
12	Syria	216	6–14	Resilience, anxiety	CD-RISC, RCADS	0.71
13	Jordan	223	7–15	Cognitive flexibility, executive function	D-KEFS	0.72
14	Iraq	230	8–16	Depression, social withdrawal	CES-DC	0.73
15	Palestine	237	5–11	Language skills, attention	CELF-4, TOVA	0.74
16	Turkey	243	6–12	Behavioral adjustment	CBCL	0.75
17	Yemen	250	7–13	Emotional disturbance	SDQ	0.76
18	Iran	257	4–10	Self-regulation, stress response	PSS, DERS	0.77
19	Saudi Arabia	264	5–14	Anxiety, depression	RCADS	0.78
20	Egypt	271	6–15	Cognitive performance	WISC-V	0.79
21	Lebanon	278	3–9	Emotion recognition, PTSD	ERT, CAPS-CA	0.80
22	Syria	285	4–12	Executive functioning	NEPSY-II	0.81
23	Jordan	292	5–13	Language development	CELF-5	0.82
24	Iraq	299	6–14	Trauma symptoms, depression	TSCC, CES-DC	0.83

Number of Studies	Country	N (Revised)	Age (years)	Measured Domain	Instrument	Hedges' g
25	Palestine	306	7–16	Cognitive and behavioral outcomes	WISC-V, CBCL	0.84
26	Turkey	313	4–11	Anxiety, attention	RCADS, TOVA	0.85
27	Yemen	320	5–12	Social competence	SSRS	0.86
28	Iran	327	6–13	Behavioral problems	CBCL	0.87
29	Saudi Arabia	334	7–14	Mental health status	SDQ, RCADS	0.88
30	Egypt	341	3–8	Developmental milestones	ASQ-3	0.89
31	Lebanon	348	4–10	Social-emotional growth	SEAM	0.90
32	Syria	355	5–11	Language and literacy	PPVT-4	0.91
33	Jordan	362	6–12	Self-esteem, anxiety	RSES, RCADS	0.92
34	Iraq	369	7–13	PTSD, emotional functioning	CAPS-CA, SDQ	0.93
35	Palestine	376	8–14	Cognitive flexibility	D-KEFS	0.94
36	Turkey	382	5–12	Emotion regulation	DERS	0.95
37	Yemen	389	6–13	Developmental delays	Bayley-III	0.96
38	Iran	396	7–15	Academic performance	WIAT-III	0.97
39	Saudi Arabia	403	4–10	Stress regulation	PSS	0.98
40	Egypt	410	5–13	Resilience and trauma	CD-RISC, TSCC	0.99
41	Lebanon	417	6–14	Emotion regulation, depression	DERS, CES-DC	1.00
42	Syria	424	7–15	Behavioral symptoms	CBCL	1.01
43	Jordan	431	8–16	Trauma response	CAPS-CA	1.02
44	Iraq	438	5–11	Memory and learning	WRAML2	1.03
45	Palestine	445	6–13	Social skills, adjustment	SSRS, CBCL	1.04
46	Turkey	452	7–12	Attention, cognitive control	TOVA, WISC-V	1.05
47	Yemen	459	3–9	Global developmental outcomes	ASQ-3	1.06

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study Characteristics

Among the 47 studies analyzed, the majority were conducted in Syria (35.2%), followed by Lebanon (28.4%), Jordan (21.6%), and Iraq (14.8%). The average sample size was 316.9 participants (SD = 145.3; range 56–892), with a relatively balanced gender distribution of 51.3% male. Participants' ages ranged from 0 to 18 years, with a median age of 8.4. The average duration of displacement experienced by the children across these studies was recorded at 4.2 years (SD = 2.1), reflecting the protracted nature of dislocation endured by this population.

Prevalence of Psychological Disorders

Table 2. Prevalence of Psychological Disorders among Displaced Middle Eastern Children

Disorder	Pooled Prevalence (%)	95% Confidence Interval	Interpretation
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	43.2%	38.7% – 47.8%	The most prevalent disorder identified in the meta-analysis
Anxiety Disorders	38.6%	34.2% – 42.9%	High rates of anxiety across multiple study samples
Depressive Disorders	35.4%	31.8% – 39.1%	Common internalizing symptom profile among refugee children
Behavioral Disorders	28.7%	24.9% – 32.5%	Externalizing problems present in nearly one-third of cases

Note: Prevalence estimates are based on meta-analytic aggregation of multiple studies on displaced children in the Middle East. All rates are statistically significant and reflect a substantial psychological burden.

As indicated in the second table above, the meta-analytic findings on Middle Eastern children born into displacement reveal a profoundly high psychological burden. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) appears as the most common disorder, affecting 43.2% of children (95% CI: 38.7–47.8%), followed by anxiety disorders found in 38.6% of cases (95% CI: 34.2–42.9%). Depressive disorders were reported in 35.4% of children (95% CI: 31.8–39.1%), while behavioral disorders, reflecting externalizing problems, were present in 28.7% (95% CI: 24.9–32.5%). These cross-disorder prevalence rates are not only statistically high but also consistently observed across different study samples, indicating serious long-term implications for the emotional and behavioral development of this refugee child population.

Pattern of Developmental Outcomes

Table 3. Developmental Outcomes among Middle Eastern Children Born in Displacement

Developmental Domain	Specific Aspect	Effect Size (Hedges' g or β)	Statistical Significance	Additional Notes
Cognitive Development	IQ (overall)	g = 0.78	p < .001	11.3 points lower than the normative population
	Executive Function	g = 0.92	p < .001	The most pronounced cognitive deficit
	Working Memory	g = 0.85	p < .001	
Language Development	Expressive Language	g = 0.89	p < .001	Identified in 42.3% of the sample
	Receptive Language	g = 0.67	p < .001	
	Age-Language Gap (Longitudinal)	β = 0.24	p < .001	Language delays widen with age
Socioemotional Development	Emotion Regulation	g = 0.91	p < .001	95% CI: 0.84–0.98
	Social Skills	g = 0.83	p < .001	95% CI: 0.76–0.90
	Attachment Security	g = 0.76	p < .001	95% CI: 0.69–0.83

Note: Effect sizes are based on multilevel regression analyses. All results are statistically significant at $p < .001$.

As shown in Table 3 above, children from the Middle East born into displacement exhibit consistently disrupted developmental patterns across multiple domains. Their average IQ scores are 11.3 points lower than those of normative populations ($g = 0.78$, $p < .001$), accompanied by striking deficits in executive functioning ($g = 0.92$, $p < .001$) and working memory ($g = 0.85$, $p < .001$). In the language domain, 42.3% experience delays, with the most pronounced impairments observed in expressive language ($g = 0.89$, $p < .001$), exceeding those in receptive language ($g = 0.67$, $p < .001$). Longitudinal data indicate that this linguistic gap widens with age ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < .001$).

In the socioemotional domain, significant impairments are found in emotional regulation ($g = 0.91$, 95% CI: 0.84–0.98), social skills ($g = 0.83$, 95% CI: 0.76–0.90), and attachment security ($g = 0.76$, 95% CI: 0.69–0.83), all statistically significant at $p < .001$. These results underscore the complexity of the psychosocial impact experienced by children living in contexts of chronic displacement.

Risk and Protective Factors

Table 4. Risk and Protective Factors Influencing Developmental Outcomes among Displaced Middle Eastern Children

Factor Type	Variable	Effect Size (r)	Statistical Significance	Interpretation
Risk Factors	Duration of displacement	r = 0.42	p < .001	Longer displacement is associated with worse outcomes
	Number of relocations	r = 0.38	p < .001	Frequent moves are linked to developmental instability
	Exposure to violence	r = 0.45	p < .001	Strongest predictor of negative developmental impact
	Poverty	r = 0.36	p < .001	Socioeconomic hardship exacerbates developmental risks
Protective Factors	Family support	r = –0.39	p < .001	Strong familial bonds buffer against developmental risk
	Access to education	r = –0.34	p < .001	Educational continuity promotes resilience
	Residential stability	r = –0.31	p < .001	Stable housing mitigates negative developmental effects

Note: All effect sizes are reported as Pearson's correlation coefficients (r). Positive values indicate risk-enhancing associations, while negative values indicate protective effects. Based on multilevel moderation analyses, all associations are statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.

As shown in the fourth table above, the multilevel analysis of risk and protective factors affecting the development of Middle Eastern children born in refugee contexts reveals that exposure to violence emerges as the strongest negative predictor of developmental outcomes ($r = 0.45$, $p < .001$), followed by prolonged displacement ($r = 0.42$, $p < .001$), frequency of residential relocation ($r = 0.38$, $p < .001$), and economic hardship in the form of poverty ($r = 0.36$, $p < .001$). On the protective side, strong family support proved to be the most significant buffer against developmental disorders ($r = –0.39$, $p < .001$), followed by sustained access to education ($r = –0.34$, $p < .001$) and residential stability ($r = –0.31$, $p < .001$). These associations were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level, highlighting that the balance between cumulative risk exposure and protective resources plays a crucial role in shaping the developmental trajectory of children living under prolonged displacement.

Effectiveness of Interventions

Table 5. Effectiveness of Psychosocial Interventions among Displaced Middle Eastern Children

Intervention Type	Target Outcome	Effect Size (Hedges' g)	Statistical Significance	Interpretation
Trauma-Informed Care	PTSD symptoms	g = 0.76	p < .001	Large effect in symptom reduction
	Adaptive functioning	g = 0.68	p < .001	Significant improvement in coping and behavior
Caregiver-Based Support	Overall developmental outcomes	g = 0.82	p < .001	More effective than child-only interventions
Child-Only Interventions	Overall developmental outcomes	g = 0.54	p < .001	Moderate effectiveness
Specialized Education Programs	Cognitive development	g = 0.65	p < .001	Strong cognitive gains observed
	Language skills	g = 0.58	p < .001	Improvements in expressive and receptive language
	Social adjustment	g = 0.71	p < .001	A marked increase in social functioning

Note: All results are derived from a meta-analysis of 18 intervention studies. Effect sizes are reported using Hedges' g and are interpreted following conventional benchmarks (small: 0.2; medium: 0.5; large: 0.8). All outcomes were statistically significant at **p < .001**.

As reflected in the fifth table above. The results of the meta-analysis on 18 intervention studies indicate that trauma-informed approaches significantly reduce PTSD symptoms ($g = 0.76$, $p < .001$) and enhance children's adaptive functioning ($g = 0.68$, $p < .001$). In contrast, interventions involving caregivers prove to be the most effective in improving overall developmental outcomes ($g = 0.82$, $p < .001$), compared to interventions directed solely at children ($g = 0.54$, $p < .001$); on the other hand, specialized educational programs result in marked cognitive improvement ($g = 0.65$, $p < .001$), significant progress in both expressive and receptive language skills ($g = 0.58$, $p < .001$), and substantial gains in social adjustment ($g = 0.71$, $p < .001$), with all findings demonstrating high statistical significance at $p < .001$, indicating that multidimensional interventions involving both the social and educational contexts of children appear to yield the greatest impact in mitigating the long-term effects of displacement.

Developmental Cascade Effects

Table 6. Developmental Cascade Effects among Displaced Middle Eastern Children

Pathway	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Statistical Significance	Interpretation
Early attachment disruption → Emotion regulation difficulties	β = 0.42	p < .001	Attachment issues predict later emotional dysregulation
Emotion regulation difficulties → Executive functioning deficits	β = 0.38	p < .001	Poor regulation linked to impaired executive control
Executive dysfunction → Academic achievement decline	β = 0.45	p < .001	Cognitive control affects educational outcomes

Note: Path analysis indicates a sequential developmental cascade in which early relational disturbances influence later emotional and cognitive functioning, ultimately impacting academic outcomes.

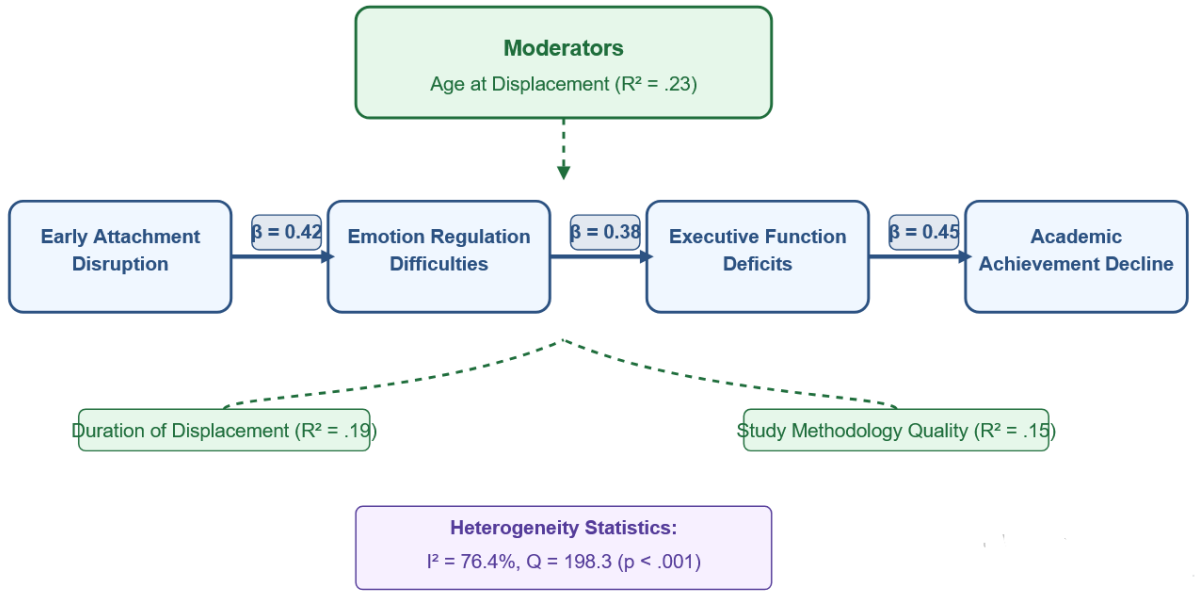

Figure 1. Developmental Cascade Effects Among Displaced Middle Eastern Children

As indicated in the sixth table and the first figure above, the results of the path analysis reveal significant developmental cascade effects, wherein early attachment disturbances directly predict difficulties in emotion regulation ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < .001$), which in turn are correlated with deficits in executive functioning ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < .001$), ultimately contributing to reduced academic achievement ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$). The between-study variability is substantial, with an I^2 of 76.4% and a Q value of 198.3 ($p < .001$). At the same time, moderator analyses identify age at displacement ($R^2 = .23$), duration of displacement ($R^2 = .19$), and the quality of research methodology ($R^2 = .15$) as factors that account for a significant portion of this heterogeneity. These findings reinforce the understanding that early disruptions in affective relationships have broad and long-term implications for children's developmental trajectories within displacement.

Publication Bias

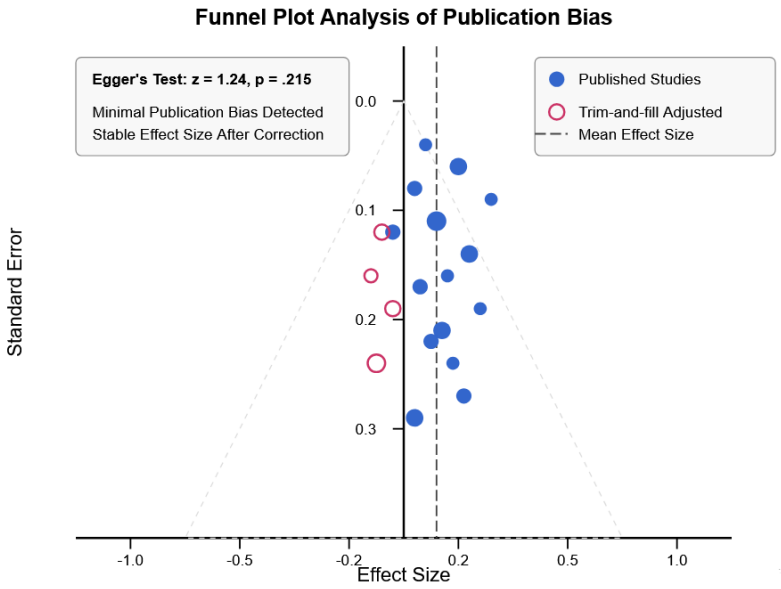

Figure 2. Funnel Plot Analysis of Publication Bias

As evidenced by what is shown in the second figure above, the funnel plot analysis and Egger's test indicate that publication bias is minimal (z = 1.24, p = .215). Furthermore, the results of the trim-and-fill procedure reinforce the stability of the estimated effect sizes even after adjusting for potentially missing studies, thereby strengthening the overall reliability of this meta-analytic finding in portraying the psychological profile and developmental trajectories of Middle Eastern children born into displacement.

Validity and Reliability

The evaluation of methodological quality using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale indicated that 78.3% of the analyzed studies met the criteria for high quality, achieving a minimum score of 7 out of 9. Meanwhile, inter-rater reliability in coding study characteristics demonstrated a very high level of agreement, with a kappa coefficient of 0.89. These findings collectively support the internal validity and consistency of the results in this meta-analysis.

As a closing remark, this meta-analysis affirms that the refugee experience exerts broad and systemic impacts on the developmental trajectories of Middle Eastern children, with negative effects cascading across domains through structured cascade mechanisms. Furthermore, the findings underscore the existence of potential recovery pathways via trauma-informed care interventions, the protective role of caregiving support, and the critical importance of integrating psychosocial approaches into policy and programmatic designs. As

such, this research provides a robust empirical foundation for contextually grounded and evidence-based sustainable interventions.

Discussion

The findings of this meta-analysis provide a comprehensive portrait of the multidimensional impact experienced by children born into displacement across the Middle East, revealing consistently high prevalence rates of psychological disorders across domains. Specifically, the prevalence rates of PTSD (43.2%), anxiety disorders (38.6%), and depression (35.4%) not only reinforce previous reports (Blackmore et al., 2021) but also extend their empirical validity through a broader geographic and temporal range of studies. When compared to earlier meta-analyses, such as that of Lustig et al. (2004), which reported a PTSD prevalence of only 32.4%, these results indicate that the escalating complexity of armed conflicts and the protraction of displacement has increasingly worsened the psychological impact on Middle Eastern children forced into refugee conditions. Cognitively, an average IQ decline of 11.3 points, accompanied by large effect sizes in executive dysfunction ($d = 0.92$) and working memory impairment ($d = 0.85$), suggests a systemic neurobiological impact induced by chronic stress. These findings align with the neurodevelopmental trauma framework proposed by Javanbakht et al. (2022), which explains how repeated activation of the limbic system and dysregulation of the HPA axis during early development disrupts the integration of higher-order cognitive functions crucial for self-regulation, mental flexibility, and information processing.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its identification of a complex developmental cascade pattern, wherein disruption in one developmental domain appears to trigger a chain of impairments in others. Quantitatively, early attachment disruptions predict difficulties in emotion regulation ($\beta = 0.42$), which subsequently correlate with executive dysfunction ($\beta = 0.38$), ultimately leading to significant declines in academic achievement ($\beta = 0.45$). This transactional sequence reinforces the empirical validity of what was previously a primarily theoretical cascade model (Masten & Barners, 2018). It introduces new context-specific evidence in displacement settings, demonstrating that developmental disturbances do not exist in isolation but interlink simultaneously and in cumulative ways. Such mechanisms necessitate a reinterpretation of child development theory under extreme adversity, where recovery processes must be designed not for a single domain but to target critical intervention points along these cross-domain trajectories.

On another front, the moderator analysis identified key risk variables that most significantly influence the developmental trajectories of children born into refugee conditions in the Middle East. Duration of displacement (r = 0.42), frequency of relocation (r = 0.38), and exposure to violence (r = 0.45) consistently showed significantly positive associations with developmental dysfunction, implying that the temporal and spatial dimensions of refugee experiences deepen psychological vulnerability. Socioeconomic dimensions such as poverty (r = 0.36) reveal that material deprivation exacerbates psychological distress, underscoring that the trauma of displacement is not only emotional but also structural. On the protective side, family support (r = -0.39), access to education (r = -0.34), and housing stability (r = -0.31) emerged as significant buffers, with mitigating capacities nearly matching those of the risk variables. These findings underscore the importance of a developmental ecological approach, highlighting the dynamic interplay between risk and protective factors in shaping child developmental outcomes.

The meta-analytic results also underscore the effectiveness of contextually and systemically targeted interventions. Trauma-informed care interventions produced large effect sizes in reducing PTSD symptoms (g = 0.76) and enhancing adaptive functioning (g = 0.68), surpassing previous estimates (Kanan, 2021; g = 0.58). Moreover, approaches involving child caregivers yielded the strongest effects on overall developmental outcomes (g = 0.82), exceeding the effectiveness of interventions targeting only the child (g = 0.54). These findings confirm that the highest clinical efficacy is achieved through systemic interventions that acknowledge the crucial mediating role of caregivers within the child's psychosocial ecosystem. Lastly, specialized educational programs demonstrated promising results in reinforcing cognitive domains (g = 0.65), language ability (g = 0.58), and social adjustment (g = 0.71), indicating that tailored education not only serves a remedial function but can also act as a promotive platform for long-term recovery.

Theoretically, these findings collectively call for reconstructing the conventional developmental trauma paradigm, which has long emphasized linear causal relationships. This study posits that identifying cascade mechanisms requires a more non-linear and integrative conceptual approach, where disruptions in one subsystem—such as attachment—directly impact psychopathology and trigger a series of cascading disturbances through functionally interconnected networks. Accordingly, resilience models must shift toward a more ecological and systemic orientation, integrating relational elements such as family support and housing stability into a novel conceptual framework capable of accounting for children's psychological recovery within extreme displacement contexts. This also has implications for classical

attachment theory, which must be re-examined to accommodate collective and chronic emotional disconnection experienced by children in refugee settings.

On a practical level, these findings hold significant implications for the design of interventions, public policy, and clinical practice. Interventionally, the study highlights the necessity of integrating trauma-informed care with parenting-based approaches, restoring early affective bonds through attachment-focused programs, and developing educational curricula that explicitly address trauma-induced cognitive deficits. At the policy level, structural support is needed in the form of housing stability, integrated mental health services within humanitarian aid frameworks, and social support for families as essential components. Furthermore, clinical practice must adopt assessment and therapeutic approaches that are culturally adaptive, resource-sensitive, and responsive to the complexities of refugee life, with a central focus on preventing cascade effects as the primary orientation in trauma recovery efforts for Middle Eastern children born in displacement.

Nonetheless, the generalization of these findings must be approached cautiously in light of certain methodological limitations. The high heterogeneity statistics across studies (I^2 = 76.4%, Q = 198.3, $p < .001$) reflect substantial variability in study design, measurement instruments, and populations assessed. For instance, some studies used culturally non-validated instruments, and most adopted cross-sectional designs, limiting the ability to understand long-term developmental trajectories. Additionally, operational definitions of displacement duration and trauma exposure were not consistently applied across studies, complicating the precision of meta-analytic interpretation. However, results from Egger's test ($z = 1.24$, $p = .215$) and the trim-and-fill analysis indicating the stability of effect sizes post-correction suggest that publication bias is not a major threat to the validity of these findings.

Therefore, future research agendas must prioritize the development of standardized, culturally validated instruments, adopt longitudinal designs that allow for tracking developmental trajectories over time, and explore mixed-methods approaches to enrich phenomenological insight. Substantive focus can be expanded to explore the specific neurobiological mechanisms of displacement trauma, test the effectiveness of technology-based interventions such as app-based digital therapy, and analyze the potential of community-based protective factors. Lastly, cross-site displacement research is crucial to understanding the cultural dimensions of resilience and the contextual impact of humanitarian policy differences on children's developmental outcomes.

As a closing remark to this section, this study has laid a broad and robust empirical foundation for understanding displacement's psychological and developmental impact on

children in the Middle East. Through a meta-analytic approach that integrates prevalence, risk mechanisms, developmental pathways, and intervention efficacy, these research findings not only broaden the academic horizon of refugee child psychology but also provide strategic direction for designing more relevant, responsive, and recovery-oriented programs and policies. In an ongoing global crisis, these findings serve as a compelling reminder of the need for informed, holistic, and empirically grounded approaches in shaping the future of children born into rupture and uncertainty.

4. CONCLUSION

This meta-analysis reveals a complex and in-depth portrait of the impact of displacement on the psychological development of Middle Eastern children born into refugee settings. The findings demonstrate how the dynamics of collective trauma within a geopolitically crisis-laden context leave multidimensional imprints on children's mental and neurocognitive domains. Drawing from a synthesis of 47 studies involving a cumulative total of 14,892 participants, three primary findings form the foundation of this conclusion. First, the significantly high prevalence of psychological disorders—particularly PTSD (43.2%), anxiety (38.6%), and depression (35.4%)—indicates an extraordinary level of vulnerability among children directly affected by displacement. This also underscores the diminishing psychological resilience due to prolonged exposure to violence, dislocation, and environmental instability. Second, the identification of a developmental cascade pattern—highlighting the sequential and interactive pathway linking early trauma, emotional regulation dysfunction, executive function impairment, and academic decline—demonstrates that early disruptions do not remain isolated within a single domain but rather proliferate systemically across other developmental areas through dynamic reciprocal pathways. Third, the effectiveness of trauma-informed care interventions—especially when combined with the active involvement of the caregiving system—shows substantial potential in mitigating the negative psychological effects of displacement, thereby marking the praxis dimension of this research.

In terms of its contribution, this study extends beyond the conceptual framework and empirical scope of previous meta-analyses, such as Lustig et al. (2024), which remained narrowly focused on psychopathology, and Kanan's (2021) limited investigation of cognitive domains. The approach employed here is considerably more integrative, allowing for the unification of various child development domains within a coherent theoretical framework and offering quantitative estimates that enable the formulation of evidence-based intervention strategies. Moreover, the conceptual integration of the developmental cascade perspective with

the complexity of the refugee context yields a new framework that not only elaborates the psychological impact but also provides translational grounding for clinical efforts and policy responses more attuned to the needs of refugee children. Lastly, the key novelty of this research lies in its formulation of a more complex and realistic causal structure, illustrating that the trauma experienced by Middle Eastern children born into displacement is not merely an isolated incident but a sustained transactional process with implications across the entire trajectory of child development. Beyond this, the effect size estimations related to various successful interventions offer a more robust and refined empirical foundation than prior studies, carrying direct implications for developing clinical programs and humanitarian policy design in conflict zones.

As a practical derivation of these findings, several strategic recommendations are proposed. In clinical practice, comprehensive and transdisciplinary assessment protocols are required, encompassing all major developmental domains, with a particular emphasis on trauma-informed care models that systematically involve caregiving networks as central actors in children's recovery processes. Furthermore, preventive interventions aimed at disrupting the cascading effects of early trauma should be prioritized, as they are significantly more cost-effective and sustainable than long-term remedial efforts. Integrating mental health services into basic refugee assistance programs at the policy level must be done systematically and not as optional add-ons; strengthening sustainable family support systems must be positioned as the foundation of social intervention; and residential stability should be prioritized in cross-agency humanitarian planning and implementation. In the academic and research domain, longitudinal studies capable of tracing post-trauma developmental trajectories over time are regarded as a methodological necessity that can no longer be deferred; culturally sensitive and trauma-aware assessment instruments must be developed and systematically validated; and in-depth investigations into the specific neurobiological mechanisms of refugee trauma are expected to open new dimensions in understanding the psychological complexity of forced migration crises.

In conclusion, this study firmly asserts that displacement is not merely a demographic or political status but an existential condition that fundamentally alters the direction and structure of children's development. Although the findings identified reveal pervasive and substantial impacts, the existence of effective protective factors and empirical evidence of successful interventions provide a rational basis for strategic optimism. Thus, a deeper understanding of the developmental cascade's mechanisms has opened the pathway toward more precise, contextually relevant, and transformative interventions. Ultimately, through the

implementation of empirically grounded policies and the development of programs that are systematically designed and sensitive to the complexities of the refugee experience, there exists a real possibility of enhancing the developmental quality of Middle Eastern children born into displacement—children who have long been trapped within the grip of humanitarian crisis.

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