Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Urgent Issues and Recommendations

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Summary

The violent conflict in Syria, which has caused the displacement of almost 11 million people to date, has developed into the most urgent humanitarian and security crisis now facing international policymakers and stakeholders. Refugee outpourings into Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq – now totaling over 3 million – have severely strained humanitarian capacity. Policy gaps and insufficient funding gravely compromise the protection and well-being of refugee children and their families.

This policy brief, based on an FXB field investigation in Jordan in June 2014 and drawing on a prior FXB field investigation conducted in Lebanon in November 2013, presents an assessment of key problems and key recommendations to the policy community aimed at improving life conditions for the estimated 600,000 Syrian refugees now in Jordan.¹

Key problems faced by Syrian refugees in Jordan

- Palestine refugees from Syria cannot legally enter Jordan and must go into hiding once they cross the border into safety, as they fear deportation.
- Syrian refugees are denied permission to work in Jordan and cannot survive for long on dwindling donations from financially strapped humanitarian responders.
- School registration and enrollment of refugee children in schools is grossly insufficient in Jordan. Additionally, in several parts of the country, refugees have limited or little access to quality primary health care, tertiary health care and trauma and post-trauma care.

Key recommendations to policymakers and stakeholders

- Halt at once the refoulement of Palestine refugees from Syria who have entered or are trying to enter Jordan seeking safety from the conflict.
- Initiate work permissions in order to provide a modicum of livelihoods protection and family self-sufficiency for all Syrian refugees in Jordan.
- Remove major access barriers facing Syrian refugees in Jordan to education and health care.
- Increase international funding to support Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan through the Regional Refugee Response Plan and Jordan’s National Resilience Plan as well as local relief efforts.

Discussion 1: Profound insecurity for Palestine refugees from Syria

Nearly 270,000 of the approximately 540,000 Palestine refugees living in Syria have been displaced since the beginning of the conflict, and thousands have fled to Jordan. In early 2013, the Government of Jordan announced a policy of no-entry to Palestine refugees from Syria.² Despite this, the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) has thus far recorded 14,000 Palestine refugees from Syria who have sought UNRWA services in Jordan since March 2011. The actual number of Palestine refugees from Syria in Jordan is probably much higher because many are afraid to identify themselves as Palestinian refugees due to the threat of deportation back to Syria by Jordanian authorities.

This existential insecurity means that Palestine refugee families from Syria are invariably forced to live in extreme isolation. Their children are often confined indoors, out of fear that any interaction with the outside world would risk discovery and the family’s subsequent refoulement. They are also unable to request birth certificates for their newborns, which denies these children legal citizenship, passports, and travel documents. Further hardships arise: Palestinian-Jordanian women married to Palestinian men who are recent refugees from Syria cannot extend their legal status to their children. These children and families, therefore, remain at risk of separation and deportation.

As another consequence of their precarious legal status, Palestine refugees from Syria are denied identification cards that would allow them to access services available

²The no-entry policy generally excludes Palestine refugees from Syria who have a Jordanian national number. Other exceptions to the policy occur sometimes for those who (1) are eligible to receive a Jordanian national number (for example, those who possess a royal acquittal form issued after their ancestors’ expulsion from Jordan due to the events of September 1970) and (2) have applied for political asylum through the Jordanian embassy in Syria.
to other refugees through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and humanitarian aid organizations. Palestinian members of mixed Syrian refugee families are also denied these essential documents. As a result, four out of every five Palestinian refugees from Syria are wholly dependent on the limited services available through UNRWA. The fear of deportation extends to Syrian refugee families with Palestinian refugee relatives in their midst; they are in many cases reluctant to approach UNHCR to seek services. In addition, Palestinian refugees from Syria can only enroll in UNRWA schools, with no further recourse to education beyond the 10th grade. Adolescents cannot pursue formal education or vocational training or work, and are often confined to bleak hopelessness and despair as a result.

The predicament of Palestine refugees from Syria is intensified in places like Cyber City, an industrial complex in northern Jordan where the government has operated a closed refugee "camp" since 2012. Palestinian refugees from Syria are held there in indefinite detention, under a constant real, threat of refoulement. Refugees in Cyber City receive aid only through UNRWA and other agencies approved by the Jordanian government. Palestinian refugee families detained in Cyber City report regular instances of refoulement, and numerous cases of attempted suicide among adolescents there have been reported. These barriers and others have created fractures and distress within Palestinian refugee families from Syria, either due to those lost or separated during attempts to cross the border illegally, or through refoulement. Such separations have resulted in a significant number of female-headed households.

### Recommendations for Palestine Refugees from Syria

**Government of Jordan**

- Immediately cease the deportation and refoulement of Palestine refugees from Syria, whether from camps, the Cyber City detention facility, or elsewhere in Jordan.
- Reverse the discriminatory policy of non-entry to Palestinian refugees from Syria.
- Allow all Palestinian refugees from Syria to register as refugees in Jordan and to remain in the country legally. Recognize at once the same legitimate status and rights for all refugees from Syria.
- Provide Palestinian refugees from Syria with the same access to public services, including health care and education, as other refugees from Syria.
- Provide Palestinian refugees the same equal and safe access to legal documents afforded to non-Palestinian refugees from Syria, such as official birth registration and certificates.
- Grant provisional legal status to Palestinian refugee children from Syria whose mothers are Palestinian-Jordanian, so that these children can be eligible for services and support through their mothers.
- Allow Palestinian refugees from Syria to have the same freedom of movement as any other refugee in Jordan.
- Provide support to establish a family reunification unit for Palestinian refugees from Syria – possibly within UNRWA – dedicated to tracking, maintaining communication with, and reuniting family members between Syria and Jordan. Ensure that this would not compromise the safety of those Palestinians who are blacklisted in Syria.

**International Community**

- Press upon the Jordanian government the importance of abiding by the obligations as described above, obligations that are enshrined in the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Jordan is signatory.
- Seek assurance that the Jordanian government will respect customary norms of non-refoulement and will respect the norms set out in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

**U.S. Department of State**

- Exert diplomatic influence to ensure that the Government of Jordan does not deport or deny entry to Palestinian refugees from Syria.
- Increase funding and support for UNRWA’s recently established protection unit in Jordan to address the unique protection challenges facing Palestine refugees from Syria.

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3 UNRWA, 2014.


5 Palestinian refugees from Syria may only leave Cyber City with government authorization and typically only for emergency medical care. In some cases, the Government of Jordan allows individual refugees to leave for a few days a month to visit family members outside the complex, though the duration and time of such visits are highly restricted and monitored.

6 UNRWA, 2014.
Discussion 2: Obstacles to building livelihoods and self-reliance

Self-reliance is one of the cornerstones of survival and community recovery from calamity or conflict. Yet most Syrian refugees in Jordan can barely meet their own basic needs. In the face of dire circumstances, Syrian refugees have negligible prospects for economic self-reliance, let alone livelihoods development.

The vast majority (80 percent) of Syrian refugees in Jordan are self-settled in urban and rural areas where they have only limited access to humanitarian assistance. Because they are heavily restricted from working legally in Jordan, many self-settled refugees are compelled to work illegally in the informal sector while risking detention and deportation in the process. Despite this considerable risk, Syrians make up 8.4 percent of the workforce in the informal sector in the four governorates of Jordan most populated with refugees.  

At the same time, the significant influx of refugees into non-camp communities has increased the demand for housing and grossly inflated rent prices across urban and rural Jordan. In addition, the prices of food and essential non-food items are becoming prohibitively expensive. For self-settled refugees, the growing cost of survival far exceeds minimal and unreliable assistance from relief organizations. As a result, Syrian refugees quickly exhaust their savings and cash assistance in order to pay for shelter, feed their families, and stay out of camps. Whether or not these refugees have access to credit or remittances from friends, family, or landlords, such compounding expenses lead to steep indebtedness, which in turn breeds negative coping mechanisms for refugee families facing these economic constrictions.

Despite the pressing survival constraints faced by Syrian refugees, the Jordanian government is understandably reluctant to allow them to work legally. Clearly, the government must also focus on the precarious livelihoods and insufficient work opportunities of its own citizens. But this critical humanitarian situation demands that labor restrictions be eased – if only temporarily – to ensure a basic level of survival for Syrian refugees in the immediate term. It is unacceptable for the government to threaten arrest or deportation of individual Syrian refugees simply for working to provide for their families and trying to achieve a minimal level of self-reliance.

Recommendations for livelihoods

**Government of Jordan**

- Amend labor policies to facilitate the efforts of Syrian refugees to obtain legal work in Jordan, and also:
  * Issue temporary work permits and short-term waivers freely to Syrian refugees.
  * Explore taxation policies toward Syrian workers that can create mutually beneficial outcomes for Jordan and Syrian refugees alike.
  * Review all policies that would preclude working Syrian refugees from seeking UNHCR assistance, and instead develop a sliding scale where assistance received is inversely correlated with income generated.
- Expand and improve vocational training opportunities for Syrians and Jordanians in non-camp settings.
- Promote public and private sector initiatives aimed at creating employment opportunities for those trained.
- Extend the scope and enforcement of existing local labor laws in order to encompass refugee children in Jordan (including Palestine refugees from Syria) and to protect them from abuse, exploitation, and the worst forms of child labor.

**International Community**

- Provide greater financial support and other resources to Jordan to assist its efforts to implement the recommendations above.

**U. S. Department of State**

- Urge authorities in Jordan to halt the current crackdown against Syrian refugees currently working in the country and instead issue short-term work permits and waivers for Syrian refugees and their employers.

Discussion 3: Barriers impeding access to education and health care

The Jordanian government, United Nations agencies, and NGOs have made significant strides in accommodating and providing for the continuing and increasing flow of refugees into Jordan. Registration, cash disbursement, access to water, sanitation, food, shelter, schools, and clinics have all been provided, albeit in varying measure, to refugees living in camps and in urban settings. Yet pressing challenges remain for the adequate delivery of education and health care that particularly impact the wellbeing of children and families.

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7Syrian refugees are subject to arrest by Jordanian authorities if caught working in the country illegally; a significant number have been deported to Syria as a result.
3.1 Education

Education, according to UNHCR, is a basic right for refugees, “vital to restoring hope and dignity to people driven from their homes.”8 The Jordanian government, along with local and international NGOs, has tried to restore education for Syrian refugee children through several policies and initiatives.

Syrian refugee children may attend public schools – either within refugee camps or outside. According to UNICEF data, 107,000 Syrian refugee children were enrolled in Jordanian schools at the outset of the 2012–2013 academic year. To meet the currently high demand and that arising from projections of additional new refugee flows, the Jordanian government has introduced double shifts in existing schools, built new schools with the help of UN agencies, hired many new teachers, and launched multiple back-to-school campaigns.

Despite these efforts, the education received by Syrian refugee children is still compromised by myriad factors, including access, quality, discrimination, affordability, and availability. As a result, over half of school-age refugee children did not attend (or were not enrolled in) school during the 2012–2013 academic year, according to UNHCR. According to UNICEF, 55 percent of Syrian refugee children did not enroll in Jordanian schools during the 2013–2014 academic year.9

But even among those refugee children who do attend school, there is significant concern within their families that the quality of education is diminished due to the low levels of training and experience of newly hired teachers and reduced school hours. Additionally, the costs of school fees and materials are often out of reach for refugees, and transportation costs can be considerable, since many schools in urban areas cannot adequately absorb all of the children in their vicinity. There is also consensus among Syrian refugees that their children suffer from discriminatory attitudes and treatment en route to and upon arrival at school.

These concerns often compel parents to keep their children at home or withdraw them from school entirely. Thus children living in urban areas are often confined in crowded apartments or restricted to their immediate locale. These impediments severely limit the possibilities for formal academic progress.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION**

**GOVERNMENT OF JORDAN**
- Ensure easy, safe, and affordable access to schools for all Syrian refugee children and provide them with materials needed to succeed in school.
- Increase support for informal and non-formal education programs.
- Cease all discriminatory policies toward Palestine refugee children from Syria and allow them access to the same education services and public schools as other refugee children.
- Permit Syrian teachers in Jordan to teach Syrian refugee children in Jordan.
- Enforce criminal sanctions in cases of harassment or discriminatory attacks against any Syrian refugee child.

**INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**
- Provide a significant increase in support to the Jordanian government to build and staff an adequate number of new schools.
- Fund more teachers and vocational training programs for young adults that will encourage them to pursue their education.

**UNICEF**
- Encourage officials within the Jordanian government to broaden the scope of formal, vocational, and non-formal education available to all Syrian children.
- Support the Jordanian government and humanitarian actors to increase the quality of education available to Syrian and Jordanian children.

3.2 Health care

In Jordan, as in all refugee settings, needs far exceed resources. The surging Syrian refugee population (now 600,000 individuals in a country of 6.3 million residents) has put extraordinary stress on the healthcare system. As a result, many gaps have developed in the provision of adequate health care for Syrian refugees.

Many Syrian refugees in Jordan are unable or do not know how to access comprehensive primary health care. They also face restricted access to more complex tertiary care, such as cancer treatments or specialized surgeries, and, near the Jordanian-Syrian border, many of the war-wounded do not receive adequate trauma care or post-operative therapy. Even when such a gap does not exist, the quality of health care is oftentimes

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poor. Refugees with chronic illnesses like diabetes, asthma, or hypertension, face interruptions in treatment due to scarcity of medications. In many cases, too, the four-month waiting time for UNHCR registration renewal jeopardizes refugees’ ability to receive any care at all.

Access to standard vaccinations of children under five and availability of minimum essential maternal and child health care are two salient, life-threatening gaps in the services currently available to refugees in Jordan.

A marked shortfall of vaccination coverage has arisen that extends to all Syrian refugee children under five who are now in the country, the majority of whom are registered with UNHCR. Access to essential vaccines varies, and in some regions of Jordan the majority of children are vaccinated, while in others very few children have access to such care. Vaccination campaigns do occur, such as the one conducted in June 2014 by the Jordanian Ministry of Health in partnership with UNHCR, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization. Almost 75,000 Syrian refugee children were vaccinated for polio in this campaign, at the Zaatari camp, and a reported 200,000 children were vaccinated for polio in 2013. Yet there still remain other vaccines – in a 10-vaccine immunization schedule created by Jordan – that only about 50,000 of those children have received. So, while a focus on polio vaccinations is commendable, it still leaves a marked gap of over 190,000 Syrian refugee children who have not received the complete sequence of vaccinations and creates major implications for increases in epidemic disease and serious childhood illness.

Another significant gap is secure access to adequate maternal health care. Minimum prenatal care is widely unavailable, and for many refugee women the high barriers to emergency secondary obstetric care are insuperable. Additionally, only about 11,000 of the estimated 150,000 refugee women and girls of reproductive age receive any contact or assistance from the United Nations Population Fund. And because of the inability to pay medical fees, transport costs, or irregularities in their legal status, pregnant refugee women experience significant health risks. They have difficulty obtaining obstetrical care and thus are at risk for obstructed labor, hemorrhage, or sepsis, with a possible subsequent increase in maternal mortality, infant death, or disability.

In addition, child marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan has been steadily increasing since 2011. Syrian refugee girls under the age of 18 are often pressured into marriage, some as early as 12 years old, in search of financial, physical, and livelihoods security for themselves and their families. As a result, a significant number of Syrian refugee girls have experienced serious health risks – such as anemia, high blood pressure and preeclampsia, as well as life-threatening seizures – due to teen pregnancy. Furthermore, the increasing incidence of cesarean section, with its associated complications, as well as the emotional and psychological repercussions of early marriage, interruption of schooling, and vulnerability to domestic violence all represent significant health hazards for teenage Syrian refugee girls.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEALTH CARE

GOVERNMENT OF JORDAN

- Demand that all health personnel working in Jordan, whether licensed by the state or privileged by humanitarian status, immediately establish policies and procedures to facilitate the implementation of country-wide vaccination campaigns for all refugee children under five years of age. Work with the international community in assisting and funding these comprehensive vaccination campaign procedures.

- Require all hospitals of secondary rank or higher to admit and care for pregnant refugee women according to the highest standards practiced in the country. For emergency obstetric care, waive all administrative and financial barriers.

- Require UNHCR or humanitarian NGOs contracted by UNHCR to provide basic maternal health care to all refugee women requiring these services.

- Initiate a national health care strategy to provide for Jordan’s growing refugee population. Strengthen the medical infrastructure in Jordan with a focus on quality primary healthcare by training more physicians, nurses and mid-level providers. Establish additional, well-equipped field hospitals at the Syrian-Jordanian border to care for trauma patients and to provide post-operative therapies.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND NGOs

- Make it an urgent priority to raise funds for the Jordanian government, UNHCR, and humanitarian actors to support their implementation of minimum basic maternal health care for pregnant refugee women, vaccination and care of children, and a system with fewer administrative and financial barriers to refugees needing health care. Take the minimum basic measures as described above.

- Allocate a portion of NGO resources to stocking essential medications for chronic conditions in local community centers and healthcare clinics in order to provide refugees with easy and regular access to the health care they need.

- Disseminate information and amplify outreach campaigns by NGOs via various communication channels to facilitate refugees’ access to local and regional healthcare clinics and hospitals in all governorates in Jordan.

- Broaden awareness about the health hazards of early marriage and associated teen pregnancy by reaching out to refugee communities in camps, urban areas, and health clinics.

UNHCR

- Immediately direct UNHCR staff and humanitarian personnel under contract to facilitate implementation of complete immunization coverage of all refugee children under five.

- Implement policies to provide or ensure access to adequate maternal health services and secondary obstetrics care for all refugee women requiring these services, and direct UNHCR staff and humanitarian personnel under contract to follow these policies.

- Develop and implement policies to allow registered refugees to seek care in any approved healthcare facility in Jordan. Do not restrict them to their governorate of registration.

- Streamline the UNHCR registration renewal process to avoid delays (which sometimes last up to four months) in access to health care for Syrian refugees in Jordan.
Discussion 4: Scarce funding support

The UNHCR 2014 Regional Response Plan for Jordan is only 25 percent funded. As of September 2014, the UNRWA deficit stood at 69 million USD. According to Jordan’s planning minister, Ibrahim Saif, the quality of services provided for Syrians and Jordanians is on the decline.¹⁵

Without determined, ramped-up funding efforts, the humanitarian situation for Syrian refugees in Jordan is destined to worsen quickly. The refugee crisis in Jordan is similar to the crisis facing other host nations, including Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, all of which are also stretched to the limit. The refugee burden on nations neighboring Syria has evolved from a short-term burden to a long-lasting weight. Therefore, more policy durable solutions are required – solutions that potentially involve resettlement options in a third category of countries that can offer Syrian refugees access to greater means of survival. The first order of urgency, however, is to appeal for and deliver more funds.

Conclusion

The policy recommendations outlined in this brief derive from interviews conducted in Jordan by a team of FXB researchers during June of 2014. The main goal of this brief is to suggest ways of improving the survival conditions of Syrian refugee families and children and to alleviate the strain on Jordanian host communities as well. In complex and protracted humanitarian crises such as this one, survival is a challenge for refugees fleeing from violence and struggling to meet their basic needs.

While the Jordanian government has generously welcomed hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees to settle throughout Jordan, urgent improvements to numerous policies and practices relating specifically to non-refoulement and to access to livelihoods, healthcare, and education are needed.

It is imperative to improve the conditions of Syrian refugees whether living in camps or non-camp areas and to improve the situation confronting Jordanian citizens, too. Both groups face increasingly dire living conditions in overstretched neighborhoods, schools, and healthcare facilities throughout the country. Ideally, these policy recommendations will serve to ensure the fastest possible response in the path to bettering the lives of hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians and their host communities in Jordan.

Recommendations for funding

UN and donor nations

- Intensify urgent appeals for funds to meet the needs of Syrian refugees in Jordan and to support the humanitarian efforts of the Jordanian government

- Offer Syrian refugees the possibility of humanitarian admission and resettlement in third countries – especially in the Gulf region, Europe, and North America – where they will have access to greater means of survival and livelihoods security.

United States

- Through relevant agencies and departments, provide UNRWA and the Jordanian government with additional funding support required to meet the needs and challenges of Syrian refugees living in Jordan.

- Sustain and increase international support for UNRWA in order for it to continue to assist Palestine refugees throughout the region.