

Research Paper

Doris Carrion

Middle East and North Africa Programme | September 2015

Syrian Refugees in Jordan Confronting Difficult Truths



**CHATHAM
HOUSE**

The Royal Institute of
International Affairs

Summary

- Civil war in Syria has caused a refugee crisis in neighbouring Jordan, raising the latter's population by at least 8 per cent. For Jordanians, the highly visible presence of many thousands of refugees living in their midst – mostly in urban areas, rather than camps – has raised fears over competition for resources and opportunities.
- Host communities have partly benefited from the presence of refugees and the international aid that has come with them, but many Jordanians feel they are worse off because of the Syrians. The refugee crisis has hit the most vulnerable people in their country hardest.
- Increased rents, price hikes and strains on public services and public order have left local inhabitants feeling increasingly disenfranchised and neglected by the Jordanian government and international donors. If current trends continue, resentment and alienation in the northern governorates is likely to increase in the coming years.
- Should Syrians be given more opportunities to earn a living legally, both Syrians and the Jordanian economy would benefit. Such a move would draw opposition, but the benefits would outweigh these costs. In order to minimize the negative political effect, a more open livelihoods policy should be accompanied by a significant increase in international development support for host communities.
- It does not look like refugees will be able to return to Syria any time soon, no matter how hard life in Jordan becomes. Jordan and the international community should take the difficult but necessary steps to prevent the crisis from making life even worse for the country's most vulnerable residents. Failure to do so will lead to greater challenges, including an increasingly disenfranchised Jordanian periphery, in the coming years.

Introduction

Jordan is one of the few states in the Middle East to have remained stable despite conflicts erupting around it, and has acted as an important ally to Western and regional powers. Like Syria's other neighbours, the country is now facing a refugee crisis of considerable proportions. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has registered around 630,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, but the actual number is likely to be much higher.¹ The influx of Syrians fleeing the war has increased the population by at least 8 per cent – comparable to the whole of Finland moving to the UK. Over 80 per cent of these refugees live in urban areas in Jordan's border governorates and in the capital, Amman, rather than in camps. They are therefore very conspicuous to the local population, particularly in the governorates with the greatest concentrations of refugees. The presence of refugees in urban areas makes it more likely that they will compete, or at least be seen as competing, with locals for resources and opportunities.

This paper argues that the significant stress on Jordan as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis could have long-term social and political ramifications. Its findings are based on more than 70 interviews in 2014–15 with officials in the UN and humanitarian communities and various levels of Jordanian government, as well as with analysts, refugees, journalists and civil society.

This is the second refugee crisis Jordan has faced in a decade. Despite this, the country's response to Syrians has been relatively generous, assisted by substantial support from international donors. The previous waves of refugees also arrived from neighbouring war-torn countries. Jordan took in hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Palestinians displaced by the Gulf wars in 1991 and 2003–11. When the country was still young, it had already absorbed nearly 1 million Palestinian refugees from the 1948 and 1967 Arab–Israeli wars.² Some of these people have moved on to new homes in the West or returned to their own countries, but significant numbers have remained along with their children and grandchildren.

Five years into the crisis, many Syrian families are struggling. They have spent all their savings, sold their assets and lost access to their support networks.

Nevertheless, Jordan's previous refugee crises cannot be compared with the current Syrian situation. For one thing, the number of Syrian refugees in Jordan already greatly exceeds the numbers accepted as a result of the most recent war in Iraq.³ By and large, people remember Iraqis arriving with more assets and savings than Syrians, which means Syrians generally need more assistance. At the moment, Syrians have far fewer opportunities than the Iraqis to move on to new homes in third countries. Finally, the US army in Iraq eventually managed to wind up the war it had started there, but there is no similar prospect of an end to Syria's conflict.

Five years into the crisis, many Syrian families are struggling. They have spent all their savings, sold their assets and lost access to their support networks. More Syrians are now in debt. Their aid grants were never enough to fully cover their living costs, while fewer and fewer of them are eligible for assistance from ever-diminishing sources of cash. Funding for the food aid and cash vouchers they receive has

¹ As of 17 June 2015 the number of Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in Jordan was 629,128. The Jordanian government estimates that around 1.3 million Syrians are living in Jordan, including both unregistered refugees and Syrians who had been living there before the war.

² Palestinian Refugee ResearchNet (PRRN), 'Palestinian Refugees: An Overview', <http://prrn.mcgill.ca/background/>.

³ Many Iraqi refugees also struggled financially in Jordan, and Jordanian perceptions of Iraqi wealth were far too high. For demographic information on Syrian refugees in Jordan, see <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>.

repeatedly come up short.⁴ Two-thirds of Syrian families in urban areas are living below the absolute poverty line, according to a recent UNHCR survey.⁵ The precarious situation of many Syrian refugees also has a significant impact on their Jordanian hosts, who tend to live alongside refugee communities.

Current impact on host communities

The governorates of Mafraq, Irbid, Ar-Ramtha and Zarqa, all on the Syrian border, have seen the greatest proportion of Syrian arrivals relative to their pre-crisis populations and have experienced the most marked impacts. An additional 175,000 Syrian refugees have registered as inhabitants of the capital, Amman.⁶ Jordanian residents in these areas have tangibly gained from the presence of refugees. Increased housing demand has allowed property owners to set higher rents, and business owners have benefited from the increase in consumer demand and the widespread availability of informal Syrian labour. This has allowed them to pay wages that would not be acceptable to Jordanians.⁷ Many Syrians have started their own businesses through Jordanian partners, further distributing the benefits of economic expansion in those areas.

Municipalities lack sufficient capacity and funding to deliver and maintain essential services for the tens of thousands of new residents, the arrival of whom has created a need to build new roads, expand the electricity infrastructure and collect much more waste.

None the less, many Jordanians feel they are worse off because of the Syrian refugees. This is partly a matter of perception. It mirrors events of around a decade ago when Iraqi refugees in Jordan were widely held responsible for economic downturns actually caused by the broader regional crisis.⁸ Unfortunately, the rise in the population has affected public services for all, particularly in the northern governorates. The quality and availability of education and healthcare have declined as overburdened facilities have struggled to cope with the significant increase in numbers of students and patients. Schools are overcrowded, even though a double-shift system has been introduced in which Jordanians are taught in the mornings and Syrians in the afternoons. People wait a very long time before receiving medical attention. Local water shortages have also increased. Municipalities lack sufficient capacity and funding to deliver and maintain essential services for the tens of thousands of new residents, the arrival of whom has created a need to build new roads, expand the electricity infrastructure and collect much more waste.⁹ Local residents have also expressed concerns about drug use and the availability of guns, both of which they associate with the arrival of refugees. On a number of occasions, local stories about Syrians have proved false. These real or perceived impacts are a major source of resentment among both the inhabitants most affected and Jordanians across the whole country.¹⁰

⁴ Christiane Fröhlich and Matthew R. Stevens, 'Trapped in Refuge: The Syrian Crisis in Jordan Worsens', Middle East Research and Information Project, 2 March 2015, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero030215>. To give a rough indication of the relative cost of living in Jordan, the 2014 Mercer Cost of Living City Rankings, which rank the cost of living for expatriates, ranked Amman just below Toronto. See <http://www.imercer.com/uploads/GM/col2014j8675/index.html>.

⁵ UNHCR, 'UNHCR warns of bleaker future for refugees as Syrian conflict enters 5th year', 12 March 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/55016fff.html>.

⁶ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=8714>.

⁷ World Bank, *Jordan Economic Monitor: Resilience and Turmoil*, Spring 2014.

⁸ Stefanie Nanes, 'Jordan's Unwelcome "Guests"', *Middle East Report (MER)* 244, Vol. 37, Fall 2007.

⁹ Public-sector capacity is further stretched by the requirements of the IMF structural reform programme, which for the last two years has included a moratorium on hiring new government staff.

¹⁰ REACH, *Understanding Social Cohesion and Resilience in Jordanian Host Communities: Assessment Report*, p. 2, June 2014. REACH is a data-collection initiative.

The most vulnerable people in Jordan are unfortunately also those most affected by the presence of Syrian refugees. Lower-income families are being displaced by higher rents.¹¹ Their incomes are also threatened by the downward push on informal-sector wages, which were already very low.¹² In the most extreme cases, landlords have evicted Jordanians from their homes in order to bring in Syrians to whom they can charge higher rents. There have been unconfirmed accounts of evicted Jordanians having to live in makeshift camps made of UN tents.¹³

Impact on employment and the economy

The impact of refugees on employment in Jordan is one of the most controversial issues. There is no consensus on this because nearly half the labour market in Jordan is in the informal sector. This makes accurate impact assessment difficult. In 2015, the independent research foundation Fafo and the International Labour Organization (ILO), supported by the Jordanian Department of Statistics, conducted a joint study based on a household survey in Amman, Irbid and Mafraq in early 2014. They found that in these areas Jordanian unemployment increased from 14.5 per cent in 2011 to 22.1 per cent in 2014. However, signs of Syrian refugees ‘crowding out’ Jordanians from work in most sectors are relatively modest, according to the study. Some respondents spoke of a decline in job opportunities in certain sectors. The study also found that most employed refugees have jobs that appear to have been created since the beginning of the crisis. This is due at least in part to the growing aid economy and increased demand.¹⁴ In separate interviews, aid officials estimated that unemployment in the northern governorates actually decreased in 2014.¹⁵

Other research paints a different picture. Its scope is not as authoritative as the Fafo-ILO study, but it reflects prevailing local attitudes towards the Syrian impact on Jordanian employment. A 2012 Jordanian Economic and Social Council investigation of the refugee impact in Mafraq claimed Syrian refugees had taken 31,000 jobs which would otherwise have gone to Jordanian women. A 2015 Yarmouk University study claimed that Syrian refugees have taken almost 40,000 jobs from Jordanians since the beginning of the crisis.¹⁶ Aid and development officials disagree with this. They maintain that informally employed Syrians are working in sectors which primarily employ migrant labourers more likely to be Egyptian or Sudanese.¹⁷ Many claim that the Jordanian government prevented international agencies from publishing studies showing that the overall economic impact of the refugees was beneficial. These took into account the large inflows of aid funding generated by the crisis.

Jordanians are just as divided about the impact of Syrian refugees on the economy as a whole. Only a few sources have published research on this problem, and their findings do not concur. The frequently cited Jordanian economist Yusuf Mansur has drawn attention to the amount of capital the refugees have brought into the country. Using Jordanian Investment Board figures, he

¹¹ In some areas, rents have risen by 200–300 per cent since the crisis, according to a November 2013 needs assessment by the Jordanian Host Community Support Platform.

¹² Salem Ajluni and Mary Kawar, *The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on the Labour Market in Jordan: A Preliminary Analysis*, p. 6, ILO, 2014.

¹³ Harvard Field Study Group, ‘Non-paper on the International Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis’, p. 2, January 2014. Part of the problem is the lack of housing law enforcement; CARE International in Jordan, *Lives Unseen: Urban Syrian Refugees and Jordanian Host Communities Three Years into the Syria Crisis*, April 2014; REACH, *Housing and Tensions in Jordanian Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees: Thematic Assessment Report*, p. 11, June 2014.

¹⁴ Svein Erik Stave and Solveig Hillesund, *Impact of Syrian refugees on the Jordanian labour market*, Fafo and the ILO, May 2015, p. 7–8.

¹⁵ Interview with UN official, February 2015.

¹⁶ Moath Freihat, ‘Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Economic Risks and Opportunities’, *Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism*, 3 April 2015, <http://governance.arij.net/en/?p=80>.

¹⁷ Interviews with UN official and aid workers.

estimated that \$1 billion of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Jordan in 2013 came from Syria.¹⁸ This is contradicted by findings from the author of a 2014 study by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, also the economist who had written the 2012 Jordanian Economic and Social Council study. He estimated that the aggregate cost of the Syrian presence up to the end of 2013 was 5.8 billion Jordanian dinars (JD) (\$8.2 billion), outweighing the benefits calculated at JD 4.1 billion for the same period.¹⁹

However, only officials and researchers read these kinds of reports and debate the issue using statistical findings. Most Jordanians form impressions of the Syrian refugee impact on employment, the national economy and quality of life through personal experience, media representations and word of mouth. In turn, public and parliamentary opinions about the impact of Syrian refugees are major factors in driving government policy on the refugees. The longer the war in Syria continues, the more likely it is that the Jordanians will become more pessimistic and more concerned about the possibility of a permanent Syrian presence.

Long-term causes of public discontent

The Syrian refugee crisis shows signs of shifting the social dynamics, which could have a longer-term effect on discontent in Jordan. The locals in the northern governorates feel increasingly disenfranchised and neglected by both their government and international donors. This arises from the real and perceived impacts of the crisis on rents, prices, public services and public order. Conversations with residents in Amman and the northern governorates frequently reveal concerns that international aid is unfairly prioritized in favour of Syrian refugees over the needs of vulnerable Jordanians. These concerns arise partly because significant aid funding is dedicated to providing services in the camps, which can be cheaper than they are in local communities. The government requires that one-third of the beneficiaries of nearly all aid projects are Jordanian. However, smaller and often Gulf-based charities providing assistance outside the official UN system to Syrian refugees tend not to replicate the practice of matching aid to struggling Jordanians.²⁰ This too has caused resentment.

The perception of unfair aid distribution is also a legacy from the early days of the refugee crisis when thousands of Syrians were arriving in Jordan every day. The aid community had far less capacity for any assistance other than emergency relief to Syrians and was less able to consider the impact on dynamics with host communities.²¹ The aid response now is to move gradually towards additionally promoting 'resilience'²² and development in communities hosting refugees. These aims were stated in the October 2014 communiqué at the Berlin conference on the Syrian refugee situation.²³ The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), the 2015–16 UN-led regional strategy on the Syrian refugee crisis, pays much more attention to the impact on host communities than previous initiatives.

¹⁸ Reva Dhingra, 'Syrian Refugees and the Jordanian Economy', *Muftah*, 21 August 2014, <http://muftah.org/syrian-refugees-jordanian-economy/>.

¹⁹ Khalid W. Al Wazani, *The Socio-Economic Implications of Syrian Refugees on Jordan: A Cost-Benefit Framework*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, May 2014.

²⁰ Elizabeth Dickinson, 'Shadow Aid to Syrian Refugees', *MER* 272, Vol. 44, Winter 2014.

²¹ Jeff Crisp et al., *From slow boil to breaking point: A real-time evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Syrian refugee emergency*, UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES), pp. 6–7, July 2013. See also *3RP Regional Strategic Overview*, pp. 7–8.

²² The UN defines 'resilience' as 'the ability of individuals, households, communities and institutions to anticipate, withstand, recover and transform from shocks and crises. [...] Creating resilience involves investing in the capacities and resources abilities of those communities and institutions most affected by a crisis so that they can eventually deal with their intermediate and long-term needs.' *3RP Regional Strategic Overview*, p. 17, interviews. This is not uncommon in refugee crises. Gil Loescher discusses the resentment host communities usually feel towards refugees given access to emergency aid that is often better than local services.

²³ http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Meldungen/2014/141028-Berliner_Erklaerung.html.

It is the first to focus on national ownership of the response and on the need to reinforce national capacity and resilience, which are critical for a sustained, long-term and effective refugee response. Actual funds for resilience and development projects remain scarce, however.²⁴

Many Jordanians who feel neglected by donors also feel their government has not done enough to stop refugee arrivals or take care of communities affected by the refugee crisis. Municipal officials complain that they are a very long way from meeting the high expectations among constituencies of the municipal response to the situation in their communities.²⁵

Residents express concerns that the tension will rise as young people start work or university, with the Syrians competing even more intensively against Jordanians for university places, jobs and public resources.

Resentment and alienation are very likely to increase in coming years if current trends in host communities continue. Residents express concerns that the tension will rise as young people start work or university, with the Syrians competing even more intensively against Jordanians for university places, jobs and public resources. 'In the next five years, we fear things will only get worse for our children's lives and future if they can no longer get a good-quality education,' states a community leader from Irbid. Youth unemployment in Jordanian host communities is already high at around 42 per cent.²⁶ As the labour force grows, wages could fall even further in the informal sector, which employs the majority of both Jordanians and Syrians in these governorates. The younger generation of Syrians will come of age facing many legal barriers to employment after years of inadequate access to education, and this raises the possibility of criminal activity. This in turn could tarnish Jordanian perceptions of the Syrians and further strain relations between the two communities.

Resentment over the refugee situation could also overlap with and fuel long-standing nationwide grievances about subsidy cuts, relations with Israel, unemployment, electoral reform, citizenship and identity. In 2011–12, members of tribal communities (especially army veterans and other public sector workers) joined forces with youth activists (the *herak*) and the Islamic Action Front affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood. Together they protested against the government for months.²⁷ The protests subsided in early 2013. For now Jordanians have generally opted for stability and peace rather than demanding reform, given the devastation caused by civil conflict among their neighbours. All realistic scenarios for the near future show the monarchy is highly likely to remain in place. No institution or group is nearly strong or independent enough to displace it, and arguably public appetite for regime change is negligible.

However, if the economic situation fails to improve across the country, and resentment of refugees continues to fuel other national grievances, protests against government policies could escalate in the coming five to 10 years. Unrest in Jordan has tended to come from the southern tribal areas, but the ingredients are now in place for the north also to become a centre of discontent. The likelihood that Jordan will complete a gas deal with Israel in the next two years could provoke very high levels of opposition at home. Dissatisfaction with Jordan's involvement in the campaign against Islamic State

²⁴ Interviews with aid officials.

²⁵ Chatham House, 'The Role of Local Government in Addressing the Impact of Syrian Refugees: Jordan Case Study', Workshop Summary, 2–3 June 2015, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/Jordan%20workshop%20summary%20FINAL.pdf, p. 6.

²⁶ Fafo-ILO study, p. 96.

²⁷ See, for example, Ziad Abu Rish, 'Jordan's Current Political Opposition Movements and the Need for Further Research: An Interview with Tariq Tell (Part 2)', *Jadaliyya*, 24 August 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7007/jordans-current-political-opposition-movements-and>.

of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) could flare up again once more time passes from the early 2015 murder by ISIS of Jordanian pilot Moaz Al-Kasasbeh. Spikes in discontent and demonstrations could further obstruct both the government's efforts to raise FDI and the implementation of its development and economic reform plans.

In Jordan, the security threat from refugees is relatively low, and this should inform any evaluation of future risk linked to this crisis. There are accounts of refugees, in particular those from camps, returning to fight in Syria. Tragically, this includes children recruited for the same purpose.²⁸ However, for the majority of Syrian refugees, life and the right to remain in Jordan are already precarious enough without falling foul of the security services. Previous cases of refugee radicalization and militarization have occurred in contexts very different from that of today's Jordan. This has usually been in places controlled by warlords or where the state monopoly on violence is already weak or non-existent.²⁹

Syrian livelihoods: a hidden blessing for Jordan?

A substantial, committed injection of cash is required for projects working to improve public services and infrastructure, household incomes and social cohesion in the areas affected by refugees. This would prevent the economic and social situation of refugees and host communities from further deteriorating. However, prospects for aid funding are not good. As of 22 June 2015, only 22 per cent of the funding requested by the UN for the Syria crisis in Jordan had been supplied.³⁰ The Jordanian government's appeal for programmatic support as part of the 2015 Jordan Response Plan was only 12 per cent funded as of 28 May 2015.³¹ Aid officials anticipate that funding will continue to fall short of requirements and that it is likely to decline as 'donor fatigue' sets in and humanitarian crises continue elsewhere.

Opening up more opportunities for Syrians to support themselves within the law could help counteract some of these underlying causes of discontent by increasing the economic contribution they make to Jordan.

The diminishing amount of UN food aid and cash assistance to the Syrian refugees means fundamental changes to their lives. In July 2015 the UN World Food Programme (WFP) announced the suspension of all food assistance to refugees living outside the camps unless it received immediate funding. This cohort accounts for over 80 per cent of the total refugee community.³² There is a good chance that WFP will soon come up against shortages of food even within the camps.

It is possible that aid funding will improve enough to cover humanitarian needs. However, the continued presence of a large, impoverished Syrian population dependent on international assistance will continue to erode Jordan's economic potential and social stability. Opening up more opportunities for Syrians to support themselves within the law could help counteract some of these underlying causes of discontent by increasing the economic contribution they make to Jordan. In

²⁸ Tone Somerfelt and Mark B. Taylor, *The big dilemma of small soldiers: recruiting children to the war in Syria*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, February 2015.

²⁹ Gil Loescher and James Milner, *Protracted Refugee Situations: Domestic and International Security Implications*, Routledge, p. 31, 2005.

³⁰ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>.

³¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2ulC5rjYSncTVVRSHJVMHR3ckU/view>.

³² <https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-forced-make-deeper-cuts-food-assistance-syrian-refugees-due-lack-funding>.

order to minimize the negative political effect, a more open policy on livelihoods would have to be accompanied by a significant increase in international development support for host communities. Discussions in progress between the Jordanian government, UN agencies and international organizations are assessing this proposed shift in approach.³³ In June 2015, Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Imad Fakhoury told Associated Press that Jordan is considering ‘policies that will hopefully open up possibilities for Syrians in imported labour categories’. This is a key ILO recommendation.³⁴ It remains to be seen whether new policies will in fact materialize.

Most Syrian refugees currently have limited access to the formal economy in Jordan and face official obstacles to developing their vocational skills. Only one in 10 employed Syrians have work permits, and practically all those working outside the camps do not.³⁵ It remains very difficult for aid organizations to receive government approval for projects involving refugees that include vocational training, income-generation or cash-for-work components.³⁶ Syrians are also required to follow the same work permit application procedures as other foreign nationals. This involves the difficult and expensive process of finding an employer to sponsor them.³⁷ At least 20 per cent of Syrians are working illegally to support themselves, mainly in agriculture, construction, food services and retail. There are also reports of trafficking and prostitution. The trade and sale of relief assistance is another way to bring in cash.

Although the government often tolerates informal Syrian labour, some Syrians caught working have been imprisoned, fined, forced to relocate to camps or even deported. Jordanian employers have also been fined for illegally hiring Syrian or other foreign workers.³⁸ As a result, many families have become dependent on sending their children out to work because children can more easily pass under the radar.³⁹ An estimated 30,000 Syrian children are working in the informal sector.⁴⁰

As well as allowing formal employment for Syrian refugees in sectors open to migrant workers, the Jordanian government should develop a more open approach to approving vocational training and income-generating projects. In addition, the ILO has recommended work permits for Syrians in low-skill manufacturing, agriculture and construction. Alternatively, another recommendation is to allow refugees to work in Jordan’s Qualified Industrial Zones, where they would be less likely to be seen as in direct competition with Jordanians for desirable jobs while still meeting labour demand.⁴¹ Oxfam has called for Syrians to be allowed more formal access to jobs in the camps as teachers, health workers, in shops and other small enterprises. Complementary activities could help ensure that Syrian livelihoods benefit the Jordanian economy. A 2014 Harvard University study group recommended the establishment of a Syrian skills registry. This would enable policy-makers

³³ Author email exchange with former UN official.

³⁴ <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/6/9/jordan-planning-new-labour-laws-for-syrian-refugees#sthash.2crwHC7N.dpuf>.

³⁵ Fafo-ILO study, p. 6.

³⁶ Interviews with: UN official, 4 February 2014; aid consultant, July 2014; aid workers, January and February 2014.

³⁷ Luigi Achilli, *Syrian Refugees in Jordan: a Reality Check*, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, p. 2, February 2015.

³⁸ Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights (BADIL), *Report Summary of Protecting Syrian Refugees: Laws, Policies and Global Responsibility Sharing*, p. 17, October 2014; Dhingra, ‘Syrian Refugees and the Jordanian Economy’: ‘These days, when MOL [Ministry of Labour] raids occur, they are geared more toward placating popular dissent against Syrian workforce participation, than actually preventing illegal Syrian employment from continuing.’

³⁹ Sam Jones, ‘Young Syrian refugees give up hopes of education in Jordan’, the *Guardian*, 12 March 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/12/young-syrian-refugees-give-up-education-jordan-work>. A 2013 UN Women assessment revealed that 47 per cent of paid household employment came from children. UN Women, *Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection Among Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a Focus on Early Marriage*, July 2013, <http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2013/7/report-web%20pdf.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Khalid W. Al Wazani, *The Socio-Economic Implications of Syrian Refugees on Jordan*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Ajluni and Kawar, *Impact of Syrian Refugee Crisis*, p. 6, ILO, 2014.

⁴¹ Ajluni and Kawar, *Impact of Syrian Refugee Crisis*, p. 23, 2014, http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_242021.pdf.

to identify areas in which Syrian vocational activity could best contribute to a host country's national development.⁴² The government has been relatively open to Syrian investors and Syrian-owned businesses that bring capital and jobs to Jordan, and this is one exception to the barriers to Syrian economic participation. It could do more, however, to encourage Syrian entrepreneurs and increase tax receipts.⁴³

A more self-reliant Syrian refugee population in Jordan could have several positive effects. The likelihood of a Syrian criminal underclass emerging would be reduced, and this would improve quality of life for everyone in the host communities. Increased work opportunities for refugees could also restrict the downward pressure on Jordanian wages, particularly if coupled with other measures to regulate the informal economy and labour market.⁴⁴ In addition, the ILO has argued that Syrians may start taking many more Jordanian jobs in the informal sector as access to humanitarian aid declines. This suggests two advantages to legalizing work opportunities for Syrians with more advanced qualifications. First, it could partly offset competition for low-income jobs in the informal sector. Second, the refugee presence would no longer hit the poorest Jordanians hardest.

Opening up work and income-generation opportunities could also enable aid organizations to increase community projects and vocational activities for the benefit of Syrians and Jordanians alike. While facing a shortfall in income, aid organizations are currently required to prioritize the most urgent needs and therefore have to focus on providing humanitarian relief to Syrian refugee households. This means less funding is available for sustained initiatives to lessen the impacts on host communities.⁴⁵ Reducing Syrian dependency on humanitarian aid could free up funding for more initiatives to build 'resilience' and for stabilization projects promoting local development and social cohesion. This would depend on donors likewise committing themselves to these initiatives.

The immediate outcome of such new policies would probably be to anger many Jordanians, who would fear for their livelihoods and claim that the policies exclusively benefited Syrian refugees.⁴⁶ Certain employers would also consider themselves at a disadvantage if Syrians were offered formal work opportunities, because this could create upward pressure on currently low wages. There are some exceptions: municipal leaders facing labour shortages have said that under certain conditions they would want Syrians to be able to work.⁴⁷ Other Jordanians, concerned about a potential increase in criminal activity, perceive a ban on Syrian labour as potentially detrimental to public safety.⁴⁸

Yet it would not be easy to convince the Jordanian public of the advantages of providing more work opportunities to Syrians. As noted above, studies and statistics demonstrating an economic benefit to the country are unlikely to dispel the popular Jordanian perception that the refugees are making their lives more difficult.⁴⁹ However, the refugee crisis will have a negative effect on Jordan's economy, society and politics unless there is a change in the current approach to Syrian labour and income-generating aid projects.

⁴² Harvard Field Study Group, 'Non-paper', p. 8, January 2014.

⁴³ Harvard Field Study Group, 'Non-paper', p. 7, January 2014.

⁴⁴ José Ciro Martínez, 'The Perils of Jordan's Informal Sector', *The Majalla*, 27 July 2014, <http://www.majalla.com/eng/2014/07/article55250594>.

⁴⁵ Interview with director of aid organization, February 2015.

⁴⁶ Focus group discussions (FGDs) with Jordanians and Syrians highlighted a dominant narrative of Syrians displacing Jordanians in the labour market, and Syrian concerns over exploitation by Jordanian employers.' REACH, *Livelihoods, Employment and Tensions in Jordanian Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees: Thematic Assessment Report*, p. 1, June 2014.

⁴⁷ Chatham House, 'The Role of Local Government in Addressing the Impact of Syrian Refugees: Jordan Case Study', Workshop Summary, 2–3 June 2015, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/Jordan%20workshop%20summary%20FINAL.pdf, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Interview with local aid worker, February 2014.

⁴⁹ For example, according to Stefanie Nanes, a study by the Center for Strategic Studies which dispelled popular myths about the negative impact of Iraqis in Jordan 'received only scant attention from commentators. Its findings contradicted the conventional wisdom too starkly to be honestly considered'. Nanes, 'Jordan's Unwelcome "Guests"', *MER* 244, Vol. 37, Fall 2007.

Effective public communications explaining the precise parameters of these policies would therefore be critical to securing long-term political support, especially if the benefit to Jordanians were emphasized. Ideally, Syrian work opportunities or vocational training would also bring immediate, tangible benefits to Jordanians. For example, Syrians could be employed to collect municipal waste. Mayors have stated that no one will take these jobs, so that refuse is piling up in the streets.⁵⁰ Aid organizations should endeavour to increase their business with small and medium-sized local firms, as this approach has the most potential to resonate strongly with local communities. They should also create partnerships with civil society organizations run by Jordanians and Syrians to create jobs and capacity-building opportunities in local communities.⁵¹

The government and international players in Jordan should make clear that supporting Syrians' livelihoods is not a step towards their full local integration. On the contrary, it is possible to support them without adopting policies such as the provision of long-term residency status, which would certainly encourage Syrians to stay permanently.⁵² No one is arguing for their full integration into Jordan, including the majority of Syrians themselves. In other displacement contexts, this is referred to as the 'durable solution' of local integration.⁵³ Instead, Syrians still intend to go home as soon as they can.

The government and international players in Jordan should make clear that supporting Syrians' livelihoods is not a step towards their full local integration. On the contrary, it is possible to support them without adopting policies such as the provision of long-term residency status, which would certainly encourage Syrians to stay permanently.

The billions of dollars donated to the Syrian refugee response across the region should not detract from the significance of actions and gestures that shape popular sentiment. The perception that donors are doing nothing to help the refugee crisis is linked to two more factors. Firstly, there is no decisive push to end the war in Syria. Secondly, donors are themselves refusing to take in more than a minuscule number of refugees. As of 29 June 2015, the number of confirmed international pledges for Syrian refugees could accommodate approximately 2.5 per cent of the total Syrian refugee population.⁵⁴ The UK has taken in around 100 refugees and the US around 1,000 so far. Donors should make an additional show of solidarity to alleviate difficulties in the region. They should brave their own political obstacles and aim to accept more Syrian refugees either through resettlement or humanitarian admission schemes.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Chatham House Jordan Workshop Summary.

⁵¹ Ajluni and Kavar, *Impact of Syrian Refugee Crisis*, p. 25, 2014. For related recommendations, see Steven A. Zyck and Justin Armstrong, *Humanitarian crises, emergency preparedness and response: the role of business and the private sector – Jordan case study*, Overseas Development Institute, January 2014.

⁵² Sarah Meyer, 'FMO Research Guide on Local Integration', *Forced Migration Online (FMO)*, 6 August 2008, p. 5.

⁵³ Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. The 1998 memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Jordan and UNHCR, amended in 2014, does not accept local integration as a solution for refugees and stipulates that 'refugees' must be resettled within six months. People are legally considered 'asylum seekers' and become 'refugees' only after they have secured a resettlement space in a third country. Asylum seekers can be granted refugee status under article 21 of the Jordanian constitution, but only in very exceptional situations. Saleh Al-Kilani, 'A duty and a burden for Jordan', *Forced Migration Review: The Syria crisis, displacement and protection*, pp. 30–31, September 2014; BADIL, *Report Summary of Protecting Syrian Refugees: Laws, Policies and Global Responsibility Sharing*, p. 16, October 2014.

⁵⁴ UNHCR, 'Resettlement and Other Forms of Admission for Syrian Refugees', UNHCR, 29 June 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/52b2febafc5.html>.

⁵⁵ See Neil Quilliam, 'UK Election Notes: Foreign Policy Opportunities – Resettling Syrian Refugees', 10 April 2015, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/17408#sthash.KR5d9Ooy.dpuf>.

Conclusion: Jordan and Syria – a shared future

Jordan cannot avoid continuing to be affected by the war in Syria. As long as the humanitarian crisis in Syria continues, refugees will continue to enter Jordan by any means possible even if border controls are tightened. It does not look like refugees will be able to return to Syria any time soon, no matter how hard life in Jordan becomes. Although UNHCR has detected some people returning to Syria from Jordan since at least 2013, enough Syrians are still arriving in Jordan to increase the number of registered refugees each year. Even if the war ended, Syria is unlikely to be either safe enough or economically robust for years afterwards to provide them with a stable home. Syrian GDP is estimated to have been halved by the war,⁵⁶ and even before 2011 Syria had been experiencing a drought that caused economic displacement.⁵⁷ There will thus be significant obstacles to postwar economic reconstruction in addition to the extensive time required to stabilize the country given its war economy and the extent of its fragmentation. The likely duration of the Syrian refugee crisis would not be unique: millions of refugees around the world are stuck in ‘protracted displacement’ scenarios. They can neither return to their home countries nor resettle in advanced economies.⁵⁸

Moreover, the broader economic costs to Jordan of the war in Syria extend beyond the refugee crisis. Ongoing instability in both Syria and Iraq is likely to further disrupt Jordanian exports and transit trade for the foreseeable future.⁵⁹ This will interfere with the country’s ability to generate substantial economic growth or improve its business climate for foreign investment.⁶⁰ At the same time, austerity measures have greatly increased food, fuel and electricity prices, leaving the country vulnerable to economic shocks.⁶¹

More and more Jordanians are admitting the likelihood that Syrians will stay for at least another decade. From the very beginning, the country’s reception of Syrians was closely connected to its experience of another enduring refugee situation: the millions of Palestinians who have made it their home since 1948. However, the Palestinian case is not a reliable indicator of the long-term prospects for Syrians in Jordan. The Arab–Israeli conflict meant creating an entirely new state with strong international backing. Israel has prevented the return of Palestinians for over 60 years, viewing this as an existential threat. The long-term residency of Palestinians in Jordan has transformed the country’s demographics, politics and economy. Many Palestinians today hold Jordanian citizenship, and parts of the Jordanian population feel they have lost out as a result of the Palestinian presence. The majority of Syrian refugees are likely to stay in Jordan until Syria is on the path to recovery from the war. However, it is much less likely that future Syrian governments would emulate Israel by blocking the return of most refugees.

⁵⁶ David Butter, *Syria’s Economy: Picking up the Pieces*, Chatham House, June 2015.

⁵⁷ Colin P. Kelley et al., ‘Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 112, No. 11, 17 March 2015, National Academy of Sciences.

⁵⁸ Gil Loescher et al., ‘Protracted refugee situations and the regional dynamics of peacebuilding’, *Conflict, Security and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 491, 2007.

⁵⁹ <http://dai.com/news-publications/news/calculating-fiscal-cost-jordan-syrian-refugee-crisis>. For further information on the broader economic cost of the war in Syria on Jordan and the Levant, see Elena Ianchovichina and Maros Ivanic, *Economic Effects of the Syrian War and the Spread of the Islamic State on the Levant*, Policy Research Working Paper 7135, World Bank Group, December 2014.

⁶⁰ IMF, *Arab Countries in Transition: Economic Outlook and Key Challenges*, 9 October 2014, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/pp/eng/2014/100914.pdf>.

⁶¹ Ajluni and Kwar, *Impact of Syrian Refugee Crisis*, p. 6, 2014.

Given the harsh realities facing both Jordan and the Syrian refugees, the country's allies should not treat this as just another refugee crisis. They should realize that 'business as usual' is likely to lead the country down an unsavoury path. Jordan, the other countries accepting Syrians and the international community should take the difficult but necessary steps to maximize the benefit the Syrian refugees can bring. This would prevent the crisis from having further negative impacts on the country's most vulnerable people.

About the author

Doris Carrion is a research associate with the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme. She joined the programme in 2012, first as project coordinator for the Yemen Forum, and then as research assistant in 2013–14. Previously she worked in the West Bank for two years as project coordinator with Tomorrow's Youth Organization. She also conducted field work in Egypt during research for her master's dissertation on the Muslim Brotherhood, which won the 2012–13 Richard Hofstadter Dissertation Prize. She has a joint MA with distinction in international history from the London School of Economics and Political Science and Columbia University, and a BA in Middle East studies from Columbia University. Follow her on Twitter at @DorisECarrion.

Acknowledgments

This paper is greatly indebted to fieldwork and research conducted by Léonie Northedge, former research associate with the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme. The author would also like to thank the peer reviewers and all who read drafts of this paper for their valuable comments. Any errors remain the author's own.

The Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative*

This paper forms part of the Middle East and North Africa Programme's ongoing 'Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative'. The initiative aims to support a coordinated and holistic policy response to the conflict in Syria and its long-term regional implications, with a particular focus on the country's immediate neighbours. It is doing so through the conduct of three cross-cutting research streams:

Refugees: Looks at the long-term challenges of the refugee crisis, examining how host governments can best navigate political, economic and social challenges to build the resilience of local and refugee communities. It also assesses the prospects of return for refugees, and particularly the factors that are likely to inform their decision.

Political and economic inclusion: Explores how a lack of political and economic inclusion in Syria and the neighbouring states has entrenched grievances and fostered conflict. This stream will analyse how the Syrian crisis has affected developments in Iraq, transnational Kurdish dynamics and the status of marginalized communities across the region.

The future of Syria: This research stream will examine the long-term implications of potential outcomes in the Syrian conflict in critical sectors. These are likely to include: economic governance and reconstruction; models of governance; and the role of regional powers.

The Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative is funded through generous contributions from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

* <http://www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/mena-programme/syria-and-its-neighbours-project>.

[#SyriaNeighbours](#)

Independent thinking since 1920

Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is an independent policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.

Chatham House does not express opinions of its own. The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s).

© The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015

Cover image © Jordan Pix/Contributor/Getty Images

ISBN 978 1 78413 085 5

All Chatham House publications are printed on recycled paper.

The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
contact@chathamhouse.org www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223