

Improving the Wellbeing of Syrian Refugees in Urban Jordan

While 20 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan reside in camps, the majority live elsewhere including in urban areas. Syrian refugees are experiencing high levels of insecurity, often due to challenges with legal status documentation. A lack of documentation limits refugees' access to critical government and humanitarian services such as humanitarian aid, education, and health care, as well as their ability to participate in Jordan's economy. This leads to high levels of anxiety, fear of arrest, and other wellbeing concerns amongst refugees. In order to counter this, non-governmental organisations, the United Nations, and the Government of Jordan should continue to support the regularisation of the status of all Syrians in Jordan, and ensure that they have access to adequate aid and services.

Legal and residency status

Registration can be a complex process, often not clearly understood by refugees. The rules governing registration, including the requirements to provide proof of identity and residence, have changed frequently, causing confusion amongst refugees. Moreover, rules may not fit their needs; for instance, many refugees who lived in camps on entering Jordan have subsequently left in search of jobs in the informal sector in urban areas, but have not updated their registration. An official 'bailout' process allows refugees to leave camps but requires them to find a Jordanian sponsor. However, the process requires refugees to be present in the camps throughout, and so is not ideal for those who have already left. Refugees' uncertainty about future plans and ability to complete legal administrative processes leads many not to register.

Registration and fear of arrest impacts heavily on refugees' ability to access humanitarian aid, free or subsidised services such as education and health care, and jobs, as well as to register marriages and births in Jordan. Lack of legal status has also left refugees vulnerable to a range of abuses, including labour exploitation and sexual abuse. Although non-governmental organisations are able to select their own targeting criteria and some do provide assistance to those without documentation, a full range of services is available only to those in possession of all documents.

Access to urban housing and jobs

Housing in the cities and towns of Jordan is expensive and constitutes a key expense for many refugees. Refugees must select the location of their housing carefully as it can determine access to work and other facilities. In many cases refugees live in poor-quality or substandard housing, as it is all they are able to afford, or the only form of housing available in areas that offer work opportunities in the informal sector. Relatively low-cost housing in urban and peri-urban informal settlements and Palestinian camps attracts the poorest refugees, migrants, and hosts. The Palestinian camps are densely populated and an integral part of the urban fabric. Poor-quality housing in built-up and densely populated areas is associated with ill-health. Overcrowding also limits privacy and dignity, and affects people's peace of mind. It is related to poor psychological health, family conflict, and domestic violence.

Job opportunities for refugees in Jordan, at least in the formal sector, have been limited due to government policy that both restricted access to work permits and narrowly defined sectors in which Syrians could work. Many Syrians hence have informal jobs, for instance as shop workers, cleaners, and casual labourers. These jobs are often highly insecure, poorly paid, unsafe, and not offering any social protection. Consequently, many refugees depend on aid assistance, for example through food or cash transfers for augmenting incomes.

Refugee access to formal jobs has improved. The Jordan Compact, a multi-year agreement between the Government of Jordan and the international donor community, sets out a government commitment to deliver 200,000 formal job opportunities for refugees by the end of 2018 in exchange for development assistance funds. The Government of Jordan, with support from United Nations agencies such as the International Labour Organization, has done much to support refugees by making the work permit set-up more streamlined and flexible. Work permits are now readily accessible to refugees, yet uptake has been slower

than hoped. As of January 2017, 35,000 work permits had been issued, primarily in the construction and agriculture sectors. Research shows that the slow uptake of work permits is due, in part, to a mismatch between jobs and refugee needs and preferences. For instance, factory jobs in Special Economic Zones located far from the urban areas where refugees live impose long commuting times. Moreover, there are also powerful disincentives for employers to hire Syrians. For instance, government regulations set out that for every additional Syrian hired, a company needs to hire four more Jordanians.

Policy recommendations

- **Continue support for regularisation of status:** While assistance is available to Syrians with the correct documentation, obtaining this documentation can be complex. The Government of Jordan should continue to support the regularisation of refugees lacking full documentation, to both achieve its security objectives and enable Syrians to contribute economically to Jordan.
- **Ensure refugees are informed about policy changes to documentation requirements:** Humanitarian and aid practitioners should work with the government to facilitate the timely circulation of easy-to-access and user-friendly communication messages that clearly set out any policy changes. These messages should articulate who will be affected, by when, and what action refugees may need to undertake.
- **Maintain levels of humanitarian support:** Humanitarian and aid agencies increasingly focus on resilience and livelihoods in urban Jordan. While this could address significant legal barriers for Syrians to obtain adequate incomes, it should not come at the cost of a significant reduction in humanitarian aid, as many refugees remain highly vulnerable, as demonstrated in 2015, when cuts to international assistance led to significant declines in food security.
- **Provide continued safe asylum for Syrians:** The situation in Syria is changing rapidly, with 'de-escalation zones' established under the purview of the Astana talks ostensibly providing a level of security in areas of Syria bordering Jordan. Additionally, many areas previously seized by Islamic State (IS) have since been taken by either the Government of Syria or the Syrian Democratic Forces. Although a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Syria is needed and not yet in sight, and certain Syrians may choose to return home to newly stable areas, these developments must not be used by the Government of Jordan or other stakeholders as a pretext to encourage or mandate the return of Syrian refugees from Jordan to Syria.

Further reading

Al Akash, R. (2015) 'Protracted Displacement and Invisible Future: Experiences of Urban Syrian Refugees in Irbid-Jordan', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 5.5: 48–53

Chatty, D. (2017) 'The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster: Understanding Perceptions and Aspirations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey', *Global Policy* 8 (Supplement 1): 25–32

Lenner, K. (2016) *Blasts from the Past: Policy Legacies and Memories in the Making of the Jordanian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, EUI Working Papers, Max Weber Red Number Series 2016/32, European University Institute

te Lintelo, D.J.H. et al. (forthcoming, 2018) *Wellbeing and Protracted Urban Displacement: Refugees and Hosts in Jordan and Lebanon*, Brighton: IDS

Credits

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