

The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Conflicts in the Making

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The attention and resources given to the Syrian crisis by the international community are currently focused on either the vast humanitarian needs of millions of displaced Syrians or the threat that a weak state with radical elements poses to international security. Yet, the humanitarian situation also implies political aspects; the immediate needs of refugees are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the implications of their displacement. As the Syrian crisis enters its fifth year, social tensions are growing rapidly in host countries due to the interaction of a protracted refugee crisis with already weakened economies and strained infrastructure, as well as volatile domestic politics, resulting in a gridlock that hinders the creation of a unified long-term vision that could guide policy initiatives to face these historic challenges. Conflict prevention is therefore increasingly necessary in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey, to address the strain of hosting four million refugees in countries that are already politically, socially and economically fragile. Ultimately, the Syrian refugee crisis poses severe problems for regional and international stability. This should motivate international heavyweights, regional powers and influential donors to put diplomatic, political

and economic pressure on host governments to take action to defuse tensions by changing political rhetoric geared toward a domestic audience, and by producing comprehensive refugee policies to manage the situation sustainably until repatriation is possible.

Introduction

With the Syrian civil war now in its fifth year, the Middle East is in the midst of one of the most serious political and humanitarian crises in modern memory. According to Antonio Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the Syria refugee crisis is reaching a “dangerous turning point.”² In addition to having reached heights of unacceptable suffering for many refugees, the scale of the situation is producing unbearable political, economic and social strains that threaten the stability of refugee host countries. As of May 2015, there are more than 1.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 1.2 million in Lebanon, 628,000 in Jordan and 248,000 in Iraq (See Map 3 and Table 10). Another 9 million people are displaced inside Syria, representing a pipeline of potential refugees.³ The refugee-to-citizen population ratio, especially in Lebanon, is a particular cause for concern, unprecedented even compared to previous waves of Palestinians, Iraqis and other refugees. Lowball estimates approximate that one in four people in Lebanon are Syrian refugees; the equivalent of 125 million additional people entering the European Union within four years.

¹ With significant contributions from Jennifer Quigley-Jones, Tori Stephens and Jeff Howry from the Study Group on the Syrian Refugee Crisis. Special thanks also to Claude Bruderlein and Sofia Quesada who participated in the editing process.

² “UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, written text of speech to the UN Security Council, 26 February 2015.” *UNHCR*. Accessed 30 April 2015. www.unhcr.org/54ef66796.html

³ UNHCR “Syria Regional Refugee Response.” Accessed 19 April 2015. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

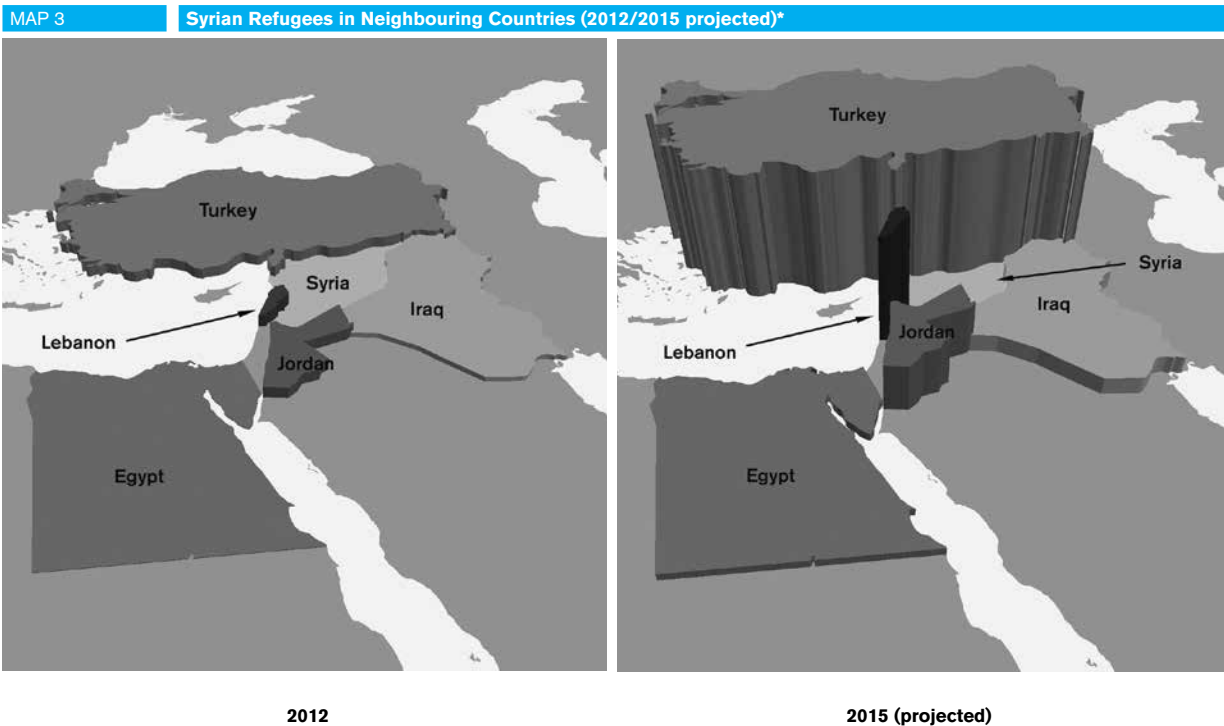


TABLE 10 Syrian Refugee Population Planning Figures

Country	Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Lebanon	Turkey	Total
2012	13,000	74,000	168,000	180,000	148,000	583,000
2013	145,000	216,000	575,000	905,000	562,000	2,403,000
2014	137,504	228,484	619,777	1,146,405	1,165,279	3,297,449
2015	120,000	250,000	700,000	1,500,000	1,700,000	4,270,000

Source: *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), 2015-2016*, December 2014, Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/regional-refugee-resilience-plan-2015-2016-regional-strategic-overview> accessed 24/4/2015. Prepared by Jeff Howry (Harvard University) with the assistance of Jeff Blossom (Center for Geographic Analysis, Harvard University). * Height represents population size of Syrian refugees in each country.

Deteriorating Social Relations

With the growing numbers of refugees and their actual and perceived negative impacts on the host countries, the initial warmth and generosity that locals had extended to refugees is declining. **Public sympathy has fallen sharply.** In August 2014, 79% of Jordanians were opposed to receiving further Syrian refugees.⁴ In Turkey, 65% thought the country should stop taking in Syrian refugees, and 30% of this group thought that Syrian refugees already present should be sent back to Syria.⁵

The level of distrust among communities is particularly troubling.

In the American University of Beirut-Save the Children's study of intergroup tensions between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities, over 90% of Lebanese nationals surveyed perceived refugees as threats to their economic livelihood and value system, and over two-thirds perceived them as existential threats.⁶ A majority of refugees also perceived the Lebanese as a symbolic and economic threat.⁷ The view of the 'other' as a threat not only to social and economic well-being, but also to the physical self should sound

⁴ BARAKAT, Sultan, and Andrew LEBER. "Fortress Jordan: Putting the Money to Work." Brookings Doha Center, 3 February, 2015. www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/02/03-jordan-resilience-barakat-leber.

⁵ "Reaction mounting against Syrian refugees in Turkey," Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), 2014/1.

⁶ Charles HARB and Rim SAAB. "Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations: Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Nationals in the Bekaa and Akkar." Save the Children, AUB, May 2014 <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=5807>.

⁷ Ibid.

alarm bells for those concerned about peace and stability in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq.

The resentment has manifested in violent episodes at the border regions of Lebanon and Turkey with Syria. The tensions and distrust are exacerbated by fears of the rise of militants among refugees, particularly as Syrian opposition groups are known to operate out of southern Turkey. Refugees and locals also supported clashes in Aarsal in August 2014 between the Lebanese Armed Forces, Nusra Front and ISIS. While incidences are still isolated, they are increasing in frequency.

Social tensions are also creating lasting, long-term negative impacts that drive future vulnerability. For example, in Turkey and Lebanon discrimination against Syrian refugees from local students and teachers creates hostile environments for refugee children who become discouraged from attending public schools. Tensions also increase the stress experienced by an already traumatised population. The 'lost generation' is therefore losing opportunities to maintain their economic, social and physical health to rebuild Syria one day, if peace is achieved; they are also particularly vulnerable to radicalisation.

The risk of unrest in host nations poses a threat to the region. The sectarian nature of the fighting in Syria has ignited domestic cleavages that were already present in the refugee host nations; the brewing instability could jeopardise already precarious situations in Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran and spread to North Africa and the Mediterranean. As evidenced by the resumption of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2008, leaving grassroots tensions to fester could eventually re-ignite broader conflicts along sectarian lines in Lebanon, political and sectarian cleavages in Turkey and tribal divides in Jordan. ISIS' successful attempts to exploit grievances in Iraq, the subsequent collapse of Iraq's army and the recent border clashes in Lebanon indicate that the refugee host states and regional powers do not have a firm handle on the spillover effects of interventions in Syria.

Drivers of Social Tensions

85% of Syrian refugees currently reside in urban, peri-urban and rural settings, often among the poorest host communities, and tensions are growing quickly.⁸ Refugees live closely with host populations, thereby highlighting natural, social and cultural differences. In addition, host citizens tend to perceive the refugees not only as economic competition but also as an existential threat, because the largely Sunni Syrian presence intersects with underlying political cleavages.⁹

There are social and cultural differences between the communities. In interviews conducted by the International Crisis Group, Turks claim that the social fabric has altered fundamentally. The differences range from noticing different dress styles on the street to more serious issues like complaints about Turkish men taking young Syrian wives through unofficial, religious marriages that affect marriage prospects for Turkish women; alleged child-marriages among Syrians also cause resentment and concern.¹⁰ Perceptions of refugees are prejudicial; it is widely believed that Syrians jeopardise neighbourhood security. While Turkish NGOs have disputed these claims, finding crime rates among Syrians to actually be lower than among Turks, the impression persists.¹¹ To complicate things, the concept of neutral humanitarianism is not widely understood in Turkey; widespread disdain is professed for Syrian men who are seen as having abandoned the fight in Syria.¹²

The refugees have also economically impacted host communities. Even though economic slowdown is an effect of the Syrian crisis, host citizens disproportionately blame refugees for the deterioration. The largest cause of discontent is competition for jobs (perceived or actual), although this affects different segments of the job market unequally. The World Bank estimated that the labour supply in Lebanon would increase by 30-50% in 2014, with the largest impact on women, youth and unskilled work-

⁸ "Region Refugee & Resilience Plan 2015-2016 in Response to the Syria Crisis: Regional Strategic Overview." UNHCR and UNDP, December 2014. www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/3RP-Report-Overview.pdf

⁹ HARB & SAAB, 2014.

¹⁰ INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. "The Rising Costs of Turkey's Syrian Quagmire." 30 April, 2014. www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/230-the-rising-costs-of-turkey-s-syrian-quagmire.aspx

¹¹ Interviews conducted in January 2015 with Turkish NGOs serving Syrian, other refugees and host communities.

¹² Ibid.

ers.¹³ Refugees have also increased demand and prices for essential goods and services. Housing rents in northern Jordan increased from \$55-70 per month before the crisis to an average of \$420 in early 2014.¹⁴ The dramatic increase has severely reduced the availability of affordable housing for poor Jordanians. Syrian refugees are thus viewed as sources of economic competition.

Most importantly, the presence of Syrian refugees is construed as an existential threat, jeopardising previously delicate balances in host countries. In Turkey, support for refugees depends primarily on whether one is for or against the AKP government, whose Sunni-oriented foreign policy toward Syria is not only highly unpopular, but also complicates relations between the Turkish government and the resident Alevi and Kurdish populations. In Lebanon, historical sectarian rifts are exacerbated by the influx of Sunni Syrians into a country with a confessional political system. This triggers fears of Palestinian integration and memories associated with their alleged role in Lebanon's civil war. In Jordan, any indication of a long-term Syrian stay threatens tribal Jordanians who are already outnumbered by the Palestinians. In Iraq, the influx of Kurdish Syrian refugees into Kurdish areas is occasionally perceived as bolstering sectarianism. To the elites and their constituents, the refugees upset a hard-won stability.

Short-Term Humanitarian Response Contributes to Deteriorating Community Relations

The polarisation of the Syrian crisis has impeded the development of longer-term domestic and foreign policies on the Syrian refugee crisis. As a result, humanitarian organisations and local authorities can only provide short-term assistance. Many locals experience similar levels of vulnerability as the Syrian refugees, yet they benefit little from domestic or international aid; the **disparity between assistance**

provided to equally vulnerable populations is a particular source of discontent. For example, the daily trucking of water to Jordan's Za'atari camp is expensive and wasteful (costing around \$12,000 per day),¹⁵ while Jordanians in surrounding communities, who experience water shortages, get piped water as little as once every 10 days during the height of summer.¹⁶ While there are growing efforts to counter this problem, like rehabilitating the existing water infrastructure, programmes have often addressed immediate humanitarian needs at the expense of community relations. There are a growing number of programmes aimed at building social cohesion, particularly through inclusive development. However, more needs to be done to target the drivers of social tensions. The refugee crisis, combined with the policy stalemate, has resulted in stressed services, overburdened communities, and rising disparities between and within populations. The problems are exacerbated by the tight international funding situation. Only \$3.8 billion was pledged for the \$8.4-billion regional appeal at the Kuwait III conference on 31 March 2015 for the Syria crisis. In light of the vast humanitarian need and political sensitivities, medium to long-term responses are receiving little attention and resources, endangering even the short-term stability of the host country.

Challenges to Addressing Social Tensions

Despite the growing urgency, there are significant obstacles to addressing social tensions between refugees and host communities. Host authorities have been reluctant to engage in longer-term plans for water, sanitation, education, health, livelihoods etc. for many reasons; two are highlighted below.

Challenge 1: Weak International Obligations

Protection is weak for refugees in the host countries. Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq are non-signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol

¹³ WORLD BANK. *Lebanon - Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict*. The World Bank, 20 September, 2013 <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2013/09/18292074/lebanon-economic-social-impact-assessment-syrian-conflict> .

¹⁴ Mercy CORPS. "Mapping of Host Community-Refugee Tensions in Mafraq and Ramtha, Jordan," 9 May 2013.

¹⁵ "Hosting Syrian Refugees - the Cost Conundrum." IRINnews. Accessed 1 May 2015. www.irinnews.org/report/99083/hosting-syrian-refugees-the-cost-conundrum.

¹⁶ WILDMAN, Thomas, and Carol BRADY. "Can Jordan's Water Market Support the Syrian Refugee Influx?", *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine, Humanitarian Practice Network*, November 2013. www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-59/can-jordans-water-market-support-the-syrian-refugee-influx.

that spell out the obligations of states.¹⁷ Turkey, although a signatory, has a geographical limitation that excludes any non-European refugees from its treaty obligations. While host countries have shown exceptional generosity to Syrian refugees, the states have also used their non-signatory status to limit the scope of provision. UNHCR has signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with Jordan and Lebanon to provide some contractual basis for their interactions; yet these MOUs only cover the bare basics. Given the inherent reluctance to act, the lack of binding international law has offered a legal basis for limited assistance.

Challenge 2: Delicate Political Balance Struck for the Short Term

Ruling elites in the host countries fear programmes that could result in permanent national changes in demographics and in the political landscape. The status quo poses the greatest challenge to addressing social tensions; at present, an uneasy balance has been struck that schizophrenically appeases citizens' fears of refugee integration and provides just enough social support to silence refugees. Fears of integration paralyse the State's ability to make comprehensive crisis management policies, yet this is unsustainable as the crisis lengthens and the population grows. In addition to compromising the welfare of Syrian refugees and vulnerable host citizens, this balancing act ironically erodes the stability that leaders are so desperate to preserve.

Conflict Prevention Measures Necessary

The humanitarian system is unable to sustain a long-term response to a protracted refugee situation at the scale of the Syrian crisis. Greater long-term

planning is necessary; Jordan's April 2015 announcement of a water distribution system at Za'atari by the Water Network Task Force is an example of steps in the right direction because it reduces water drawn from surrounding communities. However, humanitarian spending for the Syrian refugee crisis is unsustainable in the context of the sheer number of major emergencies occurring worldwide. Host countries have largely borne the costs associated with higher demand for services; optimistic projections show that international donors funded only 63% of the annual appeal for refugees at the end of 2014; the percentage has declined yearly since the beginning of the crisis.¹⁸ Instead, bureaucratic hurdles for the reallocation of development funding to middle-income countries must be overcome to finance conflict prevention and inclusive development efforts.¹⁹

The sectarian fighting in Syria as well as the protracted refugee presence has not only impacted host communities but also inflamed pre-existing political cleavages in host countries. The stability of the Middle East depends on the timely prevention of tensions escalating between refugees and host communities. Therefore, while there must be a parallel push to resolve the conflict in Syria to prevent spillover effects, immediate attention must also be paid to conflict de-escalation in fragile host communities. Community and national leaders should assert a calming, rather than polarising, influence to prevent the widespread outbreak of violence. Concurrently, systematic efforts toward addressing the drivers of social tensions, particularly regarding underlying developmental and political problems that worsen the refugee situation, are needed. Political stakeholders need to develop a long-term view of the situation and work together to produce comprehensive policies in order to jointly address the needs of vulnerable refugee and host communities.

¹⁷ Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares the right of everyone "to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." The Refugee Convention of 1951 and its accompanying 1967 protocol are treaties signed by 148 countries (to one or both of these instruments as of April 2015) that spell out the obligations of different parties. Refugee and subsidiary protection regimes in several regions, as well as with the progressive development of international human rights law, supplement the Refugee Convention and the additional protocol.

¹⁸ UNOCHA. "Financial Tracking Service, Funding to the Syrian Crisis in 2014," <http://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=special-syriancrisis&year=2014>.

¹⁹ UNSC Resolution 2191 (2014) urges "all Member States, based on burden-sharing principles, to support the United Nations and the countries of the region, including by adopting medium and long-term responses to alleviate the impact on communities, providing increased, flexible and predictable funding as well as increasing resettlement efforts, and taking note in this regard of the Berlin Communiqué of 28 October 2014".