

CHALLENGES FACING SYRIAN REFUGEES AND JORDAN

Pressures From a Pandemic

WORLD REFUGEE & MIGRATION COUNCIL RESEARCH SUMMARY REPORT
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► Acronyms

CAD	current account deficit
COVID-19	novel coronavirus
ESC	Economic and Social Council
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ILO	International Labour Organization
JSF	Jordan Strategy Forum
NGOs	non-governmental organizations
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
WRMC	World Refugee and Migration Council

► Foreword

The World Refugee and Migration Council (WRMC), in “Challenges Facing Syrian Refugees and Jordan: Pressures from a Pandemic” provides a comprehensive view of the effect of the Syrian refugee crisis and the COVID-19 crises at micro and macro levels. At the refugee level, the document looks at the outcomes of the pandemic itself, and the consequences of states’ responses to pandemic on refugees’ livelihoods, health, and prospects of return to Syria. The research shows that the security, economic, and health situations in Syria discourage refugees from seeking return, with only 150,000 doing so in 2019, leaving more than 1.36 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, according to [Jordan’s official figures](#). As a result, refugees, as some of the most vulnerable members of a society, remain disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

At the macro level, the research explores the economic effects of the pandemic on the economies of Jordan and Syria, noting its destructive consequences on the latter, compounded with the costs of violence and instability. In Jordan, the fourth largest host of refugees per capita in the world according to the UNHCR, the pandemic and refugee crises have placed tremendous pressures on an economy that is already struggling because of regional instability, limited natural resources, fiscal deficit, declining economic growth rates, high unemployment rates and overburdened infrastructure.

This report looks at three themes: “Syrian Refugees in Jordan, with a Particular Focus on Return”; “Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Jordan from the Refugee Perspective”; And “Syrian Refugees and the Consequences of COVID-19 In Syria and Jordan”. While doing a remarkable job at conveying the struggles and points of views of Syrian refugees, the WRMC has also succeeded in conveying the burdens faced by Jordan as a host country and the government efforts to control the pandemic among Jordanians and refugees alike.

With this report, the WMRC provides governmental decision-makers, activists, non-governmental organizations, philanthropists, multilateral development banks and the private sector with evidence-based data, to motivate them to revisit and honor their commitments towards refugees and refugee-hosting countries. It is high time that across global policy frameworks, refugee return and reintegration is positioned at the heart of policies towards conflict response, development, and building resilience. Meanwhile, it is important to remember that it is increasingly difficult for host countries to continue coping given the current COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic downturn. Moreover, Syria, like other refugee hosting countries of origin, requires international aid and investment to rebuild areas of high displacement and create conditions conducive to sustainable return and reintegration. As the “Call to Action” published recently by WRMC reminds us, the issue of refugees is a global one, with the need for obligations to be shared, including financial contributions and

resettlement and other expressions of solidarity, based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. A fair, equitable and predictable mechanism for sharing responsibility for refugees needs to be urgently developed.

I reemphasize the WRMC's calls for multilateral responses whereby the international community increases support for capacity-building in host governments at the national, and local levels to administer funds, and to incorporate a focus on collective outcomes in their programming and reporting. This should also be done through adopting a holistic approach to support host countries, including focusing on the water, energy and food nexus. It is no longer possible to ignore the centrality of natural resources and climate change in relation to refugees any longer.

The WRMC has called on regional development banks to provide more concessional financial support to countries hosting refugees. The Council reminds that while the World Bank has taken important steps toward increasing its support for countries hosting refugees, there is an important role for regional development banks as well. This is perhaps the time where a regional development bank servicing the Levant area is most needed.

It is my hope that the international community will step up and work together for a fairer refugee system. International solidarity is not only needed to fight the pandemic, but it is also the right way to achieve security and a global recovery in the post pandemic era. The world is as strong as its weakest link.

HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal

Honorary Chair, World Refugee & Migration Council

► Introduction

Recognizing the heavy responsibility placed on refugee-hosting countries and the need for more equitable responsibility-sharing for refugees, the World Refugee Council, in its *Call to Action* (World Refugee Council 2019), prioritized the need for more support for countries hosting large numbers of refugees. Since the World Refugee Council's report was issued in early 2019, the United Nations has adopted the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR 2018), which sets out mechanisms for enhanced responsibility-sharing for refugees. The first meeting of the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 generated many pledges of additional support – from governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – but also from multilateral development banks and the private sector. As is often the case in such initiatives, there is always a gap between promises made and promises delivered, and it remains to be seen whether the lofty promises will result in more tangible support for refugees and the countries that host them.

Since early March 2020, the world has confronted a new threat – the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) – which has infected more than 35 million people and claimed over a million lives between March and September 2020 (Johns Hopkins 2020). Every country in the world has been impacted by what the World Bank calls the triple threat: the pandemic, the effects of policies to contain the spread of the virus and the global recession (World Bank 2020). The pandemic and the pandemic-related restrictions have had a disproportionate impact on the poor and marginalized in every country. Those living on the edge have been pushed into poverty, those working in the informal sector have been particularly hard hit – remittances are falling, government revenues have declined and almost all countries have imposed restrictions on international travel.

Many humanitarian agencies have expressed concern that COVID-19 could spread and wreak havoc in crowded refugee camps (although most of the world's refugees do not live in camps) given crowded conditions and the lack of adequate sanitation and space for social distancing (Alemi et al. 2020). There are as yet no comprehensive statistics on the number of refugees who have tested positive for COVID-19, although anecdotal reports give surprisingly low numbers – although this low number is likely to reflect, at least in part, low levels of testing and reporting in refugee camps.

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, refugees have sought protection and safety in neighbouring countries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, as of September 2020, there are around 5.4 million registered Syrian refugees in the region, as shown in Table 1 below. It should be noted that governmental sources, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon, report much higher numbers of refugees. As the conflict drags on into its tenth year, with no end in sight, the refugee situation has become a

protracted one and the burden on host countries is heavy. With the arrival of COVID-19 in the region, host countries have been faced with a double challenge: combatting the pandemic and responding to the needs of refugees. This research report analyzes the impact of COVID-19 on refugees in one host country – Jordan – with attention to the impact of the pandemic on Jordan’s economy, on the perceptions and intentions of Syrian refugees in Jordan, and on conditions in Syria.

Table 1 Number of Registered Syrian Refugees and Reported COVID-19 Cases in Host Countries

Host Country	# of Syrian Refugees (UNHCR)	# of COVID Cases (WHO)
Jordan	659,673	95,864
Lebanon	879,529	89,186
Turkey	3,628,734	384,509
Iraq	242,704	489,571
Egypt	130,085	108,530
North Africa	31,667	
Total	5,572,392	3,243,195 (Eastern Mediterranean Region)

Data sources: Refugee figures from the UNHCR, last updated October 15, 2020. <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> Data on COVID-19 cases from World Health Organization (WHO) country pages (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon) <https://covid19.who.int/> and the WHO (2020b).

Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Despite its status as a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Jordan has historically shared the burden of refugees and migrants from neighbouring countries. Host to refugees from Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan and Somalia, Jordan is the fourth-largest host of refugees per capita in the world – with 62 displaced persons per 1,000 Jordanians in the country (UNHCR 2020b). Not including the 2.3 million registered refugees from Palestine supported by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, the overwhelming majority of the 750,000 registered refugees reported by Jordan are from Syria.

Since the earliest days of the Syrian conflict, Jordan received over 1.3 million Syrian refugees fleeing persecution and seeking protection (ACAPS 2020), the majority arriving between 2012 and 2013 from Dar'a (southern Syria) followed by Homs, Rural Damascus and Aleppo (UNHCR 2020a). Over 659,000 are officially registered with the UNHCR, 81 percent of whom live in urban areas throughout Jordan, including Amman (29.5 percent), Mafraq (13 percent), Irbid (21 percent) and Zarqa (15 percent) (UNHCR 2020c). Despite the majority of Syrians in Jordan living in [urban settings](#) (Healy and Tiller 2013), over 19 percent live in camp settings, including Za'atari camp (11.7 percent), Azraq camp (six percent, and Emirati Jordanian camp (<.01 percent) camp (UNHCR 2020c).

The arrival of Syrian refugees into Jordan has placed significant pressure on Jordan's already limited resources and infrastructure, slowing economic growth and leading to high unemployment rates in the country. Despite the largely welcoming attitudes of the Jordanian host community towards the Syrian refugee population, attitudes are shifting as the capacity of the country to host refugees continues to be strained. Even nine years on, the situation is largely seen as temporary. This is evident by the lack of policies put forth by the Jordanian government to integrate Syrian refugees, including in the labour market, in schools and housing. This continues to place pressure on Syrian refugees to return, despite ongoing volatility and precarious security conditions inside Syria (Mencutek and Nashwan 2020). Recent surveys of Syrian refugees in Jordan regarding intentions to return show an increase in 2018, particularly following the reopening of a border crossing in Jabber and reconciliation agreements in nearby Dar'a, a major governorate in southern Syria near the Jordanian border (UNHCR 2019). In fact, projections by the UNHCR estimate that the number of Syrian refugees in Jordan will continue to drop, with estimates close to 466,350 by 2021.

In 2020, these pressures reached a new high with the onset of COVID-19, placing significant economic and political pressures on countries around the world. Jordan was no exception. Authorities placed immediate and stringent curfew and movement restrictions on March 15, including in refugee camps. Most recently, the first few cases of COVID-19 were identified in Azraq refugee camp, leading to alarm among the humanitarian community and Jordanian officials that further spread is imminent (ACAPS 2020). The following report provides a comprehensive overview of the economic, public health and social impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees in Jordan.

COVID-19 in the Middle East

Since the onset of COVID-19, countries across the world have been reeling from the economic, social and health impacts of the pandemic. As of October 9, 2020, 7.1 percent of all

global cases are in the Eastern Mediterranean region (WHO 2020a). Top countries impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic include Iran (488,236 cases, 27,888 deaths), Iraq (394,566 cases, 9,683 deaths), Saudi Arabia (nearly 338,132 cases, 4,972 deaths) and Pakistan (317,595 cases, 6,552 deaths).

Despite demonstrable efforts to quell the spread of the pandemic through the region, COVID-19 continues to pose a significant threat to the livelihoods of populations across the Middle Eastern and North African region. Recent estimates predict that nearly 45 million are at risk of poverty and 1.7 million are at risk of unemployment (Abdo and Almasri 2020). COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing equality gaps in countries across the region and has and will continue to impact those who are most vulnerable, including refugees, migrants, women and children.

Jordan was one of the first countries in the region to enforce strict quarantine policies and curfews to mitigate the spread and transmission of COVID-19. Initially the country with the lowest caseloads in the region, cases of COVID-19 in Jordan are on the rise again as of October 9, (total 21,517 cases, 144 deaths), with over 1,300 new cases (WHO 2020b). Two borders have been closed in the country – with Saudi Arabia and Syria – and curfews have been placed in particular hotspots throughout the country. On the other hand, in Syria, a total of 4,566 cases have been reported (and 215 associated deaths) as of October 9 (WHO 2020c). However, reports indicate that this is a massive underestimation of the true number of cases in the country, with estimates of at least 85,000 cases in Damascus alone (Syria in Context 2020). While access to data is strained by the limited laboratory capacity in the country to distribute tests, there is also evidence of negligence and a lack of transparency by the Syrian Ministry of Health. Other parts of the country, including the northwest and the northeast, are experiencing first waves of the virus, with limited health infrastructure and resources to prevent further outbreaks.

Overview of the Study

This study is based on the work of three researchers and their colleagues in the region. Professor Rasha Istaiteyeh, an economist at The Hashemite University, analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on Jordan's economy with a particular focus on policies toward Syrian refugees. Oroub El-Abed and Nuseibah Shabaitah, both of the Centre for Lebanese Studies in Amman, carried out interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan to analyze the effects of the pandemic on their livelihoods. Dr. Omar Asfour, a Syrian public health expert, working with Dr. Hosam Allaham, analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on Syria, distinguishing between the pandemic's

impact in government and non-government-controlled areas. Each of the researcher's reports are published separately on the World Refugee & Migration Council's (WRMC) [website](#).

In the first section of this summary report, a summary of Professor Rasha Istaiteyeh's extensive report on the economic impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees in Jordan is presented. It begins with an overview of the Jordanian economy, as well as the procedures undertaken by the Jordanian government to limit the spread of COVID-19, and the short- and long-term effects of the virus on Jordan's economy. The report then provides a comprehensive overview of the situation of Syrian refugees in Jordan, including the Jordanian government's response towards Syrian refugees during COVID-19, and specific analysis of how Syrian livelihoods and participation in the labour market are impacted by the pandemic.

In the second section of the report, a summary of Oroub El-Abed's and Nuseibah Shabaitah's analysis of the available options for Syrian refugees in Jordan during the COVID-19 pandemic is provided. This begins with an overview of the Syrian crisis and pre-COVID-19 Syria, and then looks specifically at the impact of the pandemic on Syrian refugee livelihoods from the refugee perspective, using qualitative interviews and insights from Syrian refugees in Jordan.

In the third and final section, a summary is provided of Dr. Omar Asfour and Dr. Hosam Allaham's illustration of the consequences of COVID-19 on health systems in Jordan and in Syria, comparing the COVID-19 response effort in Jordan to that across Syria's fragmented health systems. This starts with report an overview of the Syrian crisis before COVID-19 and considers the adverse consequences of COVID-19 on health systems, economies and overall conditions in both Jordan and Syria, and its implications for voluntary and involuntary refugee return in the current context.

Concluding Thoughts

The triple pressures presently facing Jordan are considerable: the public health emergency due to COVID-19; the economic effects of containment measures and the global recession; and the growing number of Syrian refugees, many of whom have been in the country for almost 10 years. As the report by Rasha Istaiteyeh emphasizes, while some donors have provided additional support to Jordan, further resources are needed. Omar Asfour and Husam Allaham reports shows the prospects for return to Syria continue to be dim – particularly given the lack of adequate reporting on the extent of the coronavirus particularly in the areas to which Syrian refugees will presumably return one day. And as the report by Oroub El-Abed and Nuseibah Shabaitah concludes, even as conditions for Syrian refugees in Jordan decline, most Syrians do not see return as a viable option at this point.

These are tough times for refugees around the world as governments face intensifying pressures to extend services to their citizens in light of the pandemic and as traditional donors encounter increased needs on all fronts and in all regions. In these situations, refugees will do what they have always done in tough times – they will rely on family and friends, they will likely incur more debt, they will eat less and seek work in more precarious and perhaps more dangerous jobs. Syrian refugees have faced less stigma and discrimination in Jordan than in many other countries. But there is a danger that if the pandemic continues to claim lives, stress health systems and deplete government budgets, popular sentiment may become less hospitable toward the refugees.

Against this backdrop, the WRMC, with the support of the International Research Development Centre, will carry out further research in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to identify new ways of increasing international support for refugee-hosting countries particularly through trade, investment and non-traditional opportunities.

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► **SUMMARY: The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Jordan**

*This is a summary of a [research paper](#) by Associate Professor **Rasha Istaiteyeh** that focuses on the economic impact of the pandemic on Jordan as a major refugee-hosting country.*

This report analyzes the economic implications of COVID-19 for the Jordanian economy, including its diverse economic sectors and, most importantly, on its levels of poverty and inequality. It also surveys Jordan's policies toward Syrian refugees, including provision of health, education and other essential services, as well as the impact on the livelihoods of Syrian refugees in Jordan. The report also considers the important question of whether present and future international assistance can mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the Jordanian economy and specifically on the ability of Jordan to continue hosting Syrian refugees.

Before the pandemic, Jordan kept a delicate balance of maintaining stability at the macro level, providing adequate services to its population, and maintaining and gaining the confidence of international institutions. The arrival of COVID-19 has made the burden for Jordan – like all countries – more difficult in coping with economic, health and social consequences of that virus. The efforts undertaken by the Jordanian government to confront this pandemic were impressive. However, Jordan's relatively successful policies in defeating the virus came partly at the expense of freezing its economy. Even though only a few cases have been registered of COVID-19 in Syrian refugee camps as of September 30, 2020, the question remains: can Jordan continue to host its Syrian neighbours in light of the additional pressures posed by the pandemic?

Jordan, the Economy and COVID-19

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was registered in Jordan on 22, 2020. As of October 9, 2020, the number of registered COVID-19 cases was 22,763, of that number 166 have died, 5,906 have recovered and 1,232 were under treatment. The number of people tested across Jordan stood at 1,387,472. Relative to other countries in the region, Jordan has one of the lowest number of cases of COVID-19 due to strict measures enforced by the government. However, cases continue to increase on a daily basis.

Two weeks after the first case was reported, King Abdullah II decreed the National Defense Law on March 17, 2020, activating a state of emergency to contain a potential outbreak of COVID-19 in Jordan (United Nations Development Programme Jordan 2020). On March 17, the government announced the suspension of all work duties, in both the public and private

sectors, with the closure of all industrial activities until further notice, excluding vital industries such as health care, energy and food, as well as the COVID-19 crisis task force (Al-Tammemi 2020). On March 20, the government imposed a 24-hour curfew, which the army was initially deployed to enforce. This curfew has since been relaxed somewhat to make purchasing food easier; however, lockdowns remain for most other activities. For those most in need, the government began distribution of free bread and other essentials (Riedel 2020). Later, authorities further eased COVID-19 restrictions (Garda World 2020); places of worship, cafes, restaurants and hotels could reopen while strictly adhering to social distancing (Ali 2020). By June 6, 2020, all economic sectors in Jordan had returned to work at full production capacity in line with the government's decision. However, some sectors were excluded from this decision, such as schools, reading halls, universities, swimming pools, sports clubs and places of worship (Aljazeera 2020). The tight lockdown was effective in stemming the spread of COVID-19 but brought large sectors of the economy to a standstill (Al-Khalidi 2020; Albawaba 2020).

Short-term Impacts of COVID-19 on Jordan's Economy

Jordan's economy has been stagnant for more than 10 years as evidenced by a fluctuating GDP per capita and increasing unemployment (between 12–15 percent). In addition to shutting down all economic activities, the government suspended all international flights as of March 18, and closed its land borders.

The Ministry of Agriculture's plan to respond to the COVID-19 crisis included mechanisms to sustain production, with priority given to production management of farms and factories in order to preserve the availability of products to consumers during the crisis, and also to ensure availability of supplies for the month of Ramadan (Almamlakatv 2020).

On the Macroeconomic Level

The Jordanian Minister of Finance, Mohamad al-Ississ, projected a decline in GDP of 3.4 percent for 2020 (Al-Sharif 2020; *The Jordan Times* 2020). By the end of April 2020, the al-Ississ reported that local revenues had decreased by JD602 million (US\$849 million) compared with the same period in 2019 (Al-Sharif 2020). The consequences of COVID-19 meant that the budget would experience an additional shortfall of JD1.7 billion (US\$2.3 billion) (ibid.).

Because of decreased consumption and declining purchasing power during the pandemic, tax revenue from sales tax decreased. In addition, revenues from corporate income and profits tax also decreased in accordance to the slump in economic activity, leading to a contraction

in public revenues and limiting improvement in public expenditure efficiency (Jordan Strategy Forum [JSF] 2020b). COVID-19 increased pressure on the public budget because of both increased spending and decreased tax revenues.

The Jordanian government budget deficit is expected to be around US\$4.5 billion or 10 percent of GDP in 2020 (Al Sharif 2020) and its current account deficit is expected to expand to 5.3 percent of GDP by 2021 from 2.8 percent in 2019 as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (Export Entreprises 2020).

Unemployment

Before COVID-19, unemployment in Jordan was close to 20 percent – the highest in Jordan's recent history – and if the current closure and hedging continues, that percentage will likely increase and create new structural problems. A huge part of the Jordanian labour force – more than 52 percent – works in the informal sector (most are day labourers). In addition, seasonal workers, workers who are not covered by social security or other safety nets, refugees living inside camps and Jordanians living in impoverished conditions are only a few examples of workers whose existing vulnerabilities have been or will be compounded by the current crisis (Husseini 2020).

Industrial production has slowed as a result of decreasing demand and supply chain disruptions. In contrast, food and agricultural industries are expected to make a quick recovery as consumer demand increases as the lockdown is eased. (JSF 2020a). COVID-19 related industries are booming during the epidemic, such as those producing food, drugs, detergents, sterilizers and masks (Al-Da'jah 2020).

The tourist sector has suffered disastrous losses. In 2019, five million foreign tourists visited the country, producing jobs, especially in the historically poor south of the country (Riedel 2020; Alajlouni 2020). In fact, 5.7 percent of the country's GDP was sustained by the air transport sector and foreign tourists arriving by air (Arabian Aerospace 2020). Bankruptcies of airlines and tourist offices are likely to occur, and losses in foreign currency and job creation are expected (Albawaba 2020). According to Fitch Ratings (2020), the slump in tourism will cause a doubling of the current account deficit (CAD) to US\$2.5 billion or 6.1 percent of GDP in 2020, after a sharp improvement in the CAD to a 15-year low of 2.9 percent of GDP in 2019. Low oil prices and a decline in non-oil imports will only partly offset lower tourism revenue.

Jordanians Working Abroad

It is expected that large numbers of expatriate Jordanians working in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries will be laid off because of the double crisis hitting the economies of these countries: the drop in oil prices and the economic recession resulting from COVID-19 (Economic and Social Council [ESC] 2020). The volume of remittances of Jordanians working outside Jordan decreased during the first quarter of 2020 by 5.4 percent (Union of Arab Chambers 2020). Even in cases where Jordanian workers in GCC countries were not laid off, they may experience cuts in their wages. The situation facing Jordanian expatriate workers is difficult, especially with the expectation that a quarter of a million Jordanian expatriates will return from the GCC countries after losing their jobs (Fdailat 2020).

Foreign aid and foreign direct investment has been crucial to the government's finances since Winston Churchill created Transjordan in 1921 (Riedel 2020). The present COVID-19 crisis has dried up the financial markets while the decrease in consumption has siphoned the liquidity available to the private sector (*The Jordan Times* 2020). Therefore, direct foreign investments, especially those from the Gulf and foreign countries are expected to decline (ESC 2020).

Vulnerabilities

The socio-economic impact on Jordan of the COVID-19 outbreak will likely increase both unemployment and underemployment; women and youth in particular have been and will be disproportionately affected by job losses leading to increased inequities. The longer-term economic impacts include the potential to reverse recent progress on refugee self-reliance, with decreasing livelihood opportunities.

As Ursula Lindsey (2020) summarizes, Jordan's swift and near total lockdown has kept COVID-19 in check, but it has also put enormous pressure on the kingdom's poorest and most vulnerable residents.

Effects on Syrian Refugees

Approximately 80 percent of Syrian refugees live under the poverty line and only two percent of households have savings. Following the announcement of travel restrictions, refugees living in Za'atari refugee camp reported an immediate increase in prices at stores in the camp's main market (Dhingra 2020).

The first two cases of COVID-19 in the Azraq camp for Syrian refugees, home to over 40,000 people, were identified on September 8, 2020. In the Jordanian refugee camps, the UNHCR

and other partners, with the support of the Jordanian Ministry of Health, provide health and humanitarian support to respond to COVID-19 (Mhailan 2020). Refugees outside of the camps can access Jordanian health services for a nominal fee (Bar'el 2020).

The Jordanian government relies on significant international support to both aid refugees and keep its economy afloat. However, the rapid rollout of strict containment measures has disrupted aid activities, threatened livelihoods and failed to take into account the needs of both refugees and vulnerable Jordanians (Dhingra 2020).

Education

Close to one in three of the 660,000 Syrians registered with the UNHCR in Jordan (that is almost 220,000) are school-aged children between five and 17 years old (HRW 2016). Jordan has facilitated the integration of refugee children into its education system through the Ministry of Education schools in camp settings or host-community schools (including single shift and double shift schools) in urban areas or through accredited non-formal education (United Nations International Children's Fund [UNICEF] and ESC, 2020).

When the nationwide lockdown was announced, the Jordanian authorities closed the 32 schools in Za'tari camp and broadcast lessons to the more than 18,000 enrolled students there on a television channel used by pupils across the country (Dunmore and Cherri 2020). Many challenges faced refugees in accessing online education, including access to devices and the internet, the inability to ask questions about the content, and receiving limited help from teachers and parents (Małachowska et al. 2020).

Health

After the initial announcement of a national emergency, aid organizations in Jordan suspended or scaled back on many activities except for essential programs such as health care and sanitation. The lockdown also affected existing aid distribution systems due to confusion over the restrictions on mobility, as access by NGO employees was also restricted and United Nations cluster group meetings to coordinate and oversee assistance were postponed (Dhingra 2020). Nonetheless, active surveillance continues in the camps by all the health partners, including rapid random testing.

All necessary measures to continue general food assistance to refugees is underway, as the World Food Program is expanding its caseload to respond to the needs of COVID-19. UNICEF continues its essential water and sanitation services in Azraq, Za'atari and King Abdullah Park camps serving 112,852 refugees, despite limited access for personnel (UNHCR 2020).

Livelihoods

Refugees face compound challenges of difficult living conditions, limited health-care access, economic insecurity and a reliance on humanitarian assistance. Many refugees have lost their livelihoods and are facing poverty, resulting from a sudden loss of income as daily wage earners. Before COVID-19, the Syrian refugee workforce was working in an expanding informal economy, characterized by low and declining wages, long workdays and poor working conditions, including a demonstrable lack of work contracts (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2017).

Social protections are lacking; a recent ILO and Fafo (2020) publication found that only 24 percent of Syrians had social security coverage in comparison with 63 percent of Jordanians. The Jordanian government has [announced](#) a fund to assist workers who lost income because of COVID-19, but it targets mostly Jordanian workers, and nearly all refugees are [ineligible for government aid](#) (Vidal 2020).

Loss of livelihoods due to COVID-19 and a prolonged curfew in Jordan has further exacerbated existing vulnerabilities (Norwegian Refugee Council 2020). The protracted conflict has left refugees in host communities increasingly subject to heightened levels of vulnerability and food insecurity as they use coping mechanisms that deplete their assets and leave them with few alternative options for meeting basic needs.

The impact on both Syrians in urban areas and Jordanians due to the COVID-19 crisis can be summarized as a critical loss of livelihood, increases in sexual and gender-based violence (particularly due to crowded conditions), work rights violations, loss of education, threat of eviction (inability to pay rent and bills) and, finally, increased risk of infection (due to overcrowding). Hence, the long-term impact is increased poverty and risk of increased exploitation in the workplace, multiple risks to children, precarious tenure and new displacement.

At a time when the Jordan Response Plan (2020–2022) is reporting an 81 percent shortfall (Al-Shboul 2020) the challenges facing Syrian refugees and their livelihoods in Jordan is increasing. While some refugees may choose to return in this situation, most Syrian refugees are resisting this option. Between the risk of the disease and the economic impact of COVID-19-related measures, it is unlikely that economic conditions for Syrian refugees and for vulnerable Jordanians will improve in the near future. Even as present international assistance is inadequate to meet the needs of refugees, there are fears that international support will diminish over the long term.

According to a study by Alexandra Francis (2015), if Jordan is to confront its national challenges and continue to provide a safe haven for Syrian refugees, the country will depend on increased international support. Without additional aid and a sustainable response to the refugee crisis, Jordan will continue to restrict the protection space for Syrians. Doing so will increase the long-term risks of instability in Jordan and the region. Jordan and international donors should act on the opportunities inherent in the Syrian refugee influx into the Kingdom in order to both enhance Jordan's national development and provide for Syrians displaced by the most devastating conflict and humanitarian crisis in the twenty-first century.

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► **SUMMARY: Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Jordan from the Refugee Perspective**

*This is a summary of a [research paper](#) by **Oroub El-Abed** and **Nuseibah Shabaitah**. Their study utilized qualitative interviews to understand the impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugee households, with a focus on coping strategies related to livelihoods, access to education, employment, social and financial capital, as well as thoughts regarding their return to Syria as a result of the lockdown.*

Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugee Livelihoods

The main concerns for Syrian refugees since their arrival in Jordan have been safety, family unity, finding ways to sustain themselves and their families, and ensuring a better future for their children. The pandemic has caused an alarming increase in risks to livelihood since the majority of refugees depend on their daily income for creating a living for themselves and their dependent family members. Syrian refugees have adopted a range of strategies to sustain themselves over the course of their displacement, including working long hours in low-status and low-paying jobs, working illegally and informally, using their networks to find and increase the quality of their jobs, partnering with locals to start businesses, and maximizing access to formal humanitarian aid. To sustain themselves during the pandemic, refugees have relied on support and ad hoc help from a wide range of family, friends, neighbours, employers and others in the host community, while also benefitting from more formal support from state or aid actors (Agenda for Humanity 2016).

Methodology

This study was conducted based on convenience sampling phone calls with 35 Syrian refugees distributed all over Jordan, including 18 males and 17 females across Mafrqa, Irbid, Amman, Zarqa'a and Ma'an governorates, as well as Azraq, Emirati and Za'atari camps. Researchers sought to unpack the everyday practices of Syrian refugees through recorded semi-structured interviews as well as a review of the literature that has been written on Syrian refugees' livelihoods in Jordan.

Sample Distribution Across Governorates by Region/Camps and Gender

Governorate	Region	No. of Interviews	Female	Male
Mafraq	City Center	4	4	0
	Villages	1	1	0
	ITS	3	2	1
Irbid	Irbid Villages	3	1	2
	Irbid City	3	1	2
Amman	North Amman	4	1	3
	East Amman	5	2	3
Zarqa'a	City Center	1	0	1
Ma'an	Ma'an City	3	2	1
Camps				
Azraq Camp		2	1	1
Emirati Camp		2	0	2
Za'atari Camp		4	2	2
Total		35	17	18

Summary of Findings

The lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly decreased demand in many economic sectors, especially in the tourism, construction, trade and customer service sectors. Consequently, the situation deteriorated for those who were already challenged by vulnerable circumstances. The impact of the pandemic on Syrian refugees has been grave as they have very limited income, restricted job opportunities and no savings. The venues for the Syrian refugees to carve out a living have been very limited and the chances for them to secure support have been meager, whether from international NGOs or some local organizations. The income they used to generate was important in some cases to also support their families back in Syria, where the conflict continues. The pandemic has affected everyone, including locals, which has made it difficult for the refugees to expect much support from their social networks. During the interviews, they reported generous attitudes and a sympathetic stance from the host society in alleviating some of the financial burdens, this support is not sufficient to make a living and to ensure the wellbeing of everyone within the household.

Impact on Physical Capital

During the interviews and while talking about their livelihoods before COVID-19, the respondents, in their different settings, appreciated the geographic choice of their residence and expressed their ability to strategize their everyday activities based on that physical location. For one respondent, Cuso31, who is a skilled labourer, “Yes, north Amman is still being built; there are a lot of construction sites,” and this has provided him with more work opportunities (Male, 37 yrs., North Amman, August 2020). As a result, he was able to ensure a daily income for himself and his family members until the lockdown started and he stopped working. Some of our interviewees told us about their lives in the Syrian refugee camps and how they have managed to make the best of available opportunities, noting especially that since 2017 they have been given the right to leave and return to the camp once a month. Another participant, whose work was stopped for three months during the lockdown, works with one of the NGOs in the camps and studies at a vocational collage in Amman at the same time, whereby she funds her education and herself, “Yes, being in the camp has helped me quite well, to gain an opportunity [to work]. Even though I don’t have a degree yet,” (Female, 21 yrs., Za’atari Camp, July 2020).

Impact on Human Capital: Education

For most Syrian refugees across Jordan, access to online education has also been difficult throughout the pandemic. Several interviewees reported not being able to recharge their mobile phone credits in order to access the internet for their children’s classes or exams. Having more than one child at school and in need of access to devices for online classes, and the limited numbers of devices available in each household made it hard for the students to follow along with the learning process, “The children had troubles understanding, they had troubles in the exams and the registration. The internet connection was very bad, and we had only one mobile phone.” (Cuso11, male 35yrs, Za’atari Camp, July 2020).

One of the people interviewed had access to a personal computer or laptop/tablet. Some sought to purchase another mobile phone in order to ensure that their education can continue. The approximate cost of mobile phones or used mobiles ranges between JD50–70. To make the educational process possible, some have had “to borrow the money to buy the mobile phone” (Cuso13, male 48 yrs., Emirati camps with eight members in his household, July 2020). Efforts have been made to support e-learning and innovative education initiatives continue as children return to the classroom through programs and platforms that are aligned with the Jordanian curriculum.

Impact on Human Capital: Employment

The lockdown limited all movement in and out of the camps and in urban settings. This had a major impact that is “so large that it is not possible to measure or know its scale up until now,” a claim by one of the civil society bodies serving Syrian refugees (Hamou 2020). One participant stated, “My salary was reduced, and the working hours got reduced from 10 hours a day to eight hours a day, there has been a 25 percentage of reduction to our salary.” (Cuso20, Male, 24 yrs., Irbid City, July 2020). His salary came down to JD250 from JD325s. He was not paid anything during the 45 days of official lockdown from the owner of the restaurant. Of those we talked to, some were stopped from working and others had been and remained unemployed. Two brothers with work permits and legal status had worked in a restaurant before COVID-19 as their mother explained (female, 46yrs, Azraq Camp, July 2020), who talked about their exploitation. As two breadwinners for the household, they were not paid their wages before COVID-19 and were never given work contracts. After the lockdown they failed to claim their JD500 and their unpaid transportation fees.

Syrian refugees have not been able to access job opportunities easily due to the many restrictions; the closed jobs that limited their participation to certain sectors; and their exploitation in the private sector in terms of their working hours, payment and poor working conditions. As the majority of cases were wage workers, this meant that for several months they were unable to make any money, buy food or pay the rent for their houses. Whether in urban settings or in camps, and whether working in the private sector or working from home, the challenges and the risks were high for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Impact on Financial Capital: Income and Savings

The limited income situation triggered by COVID-19 increased anxiety and was mentioned by most of the refugees interviewed. Syrian refugees had to make use of their financial assets in order to make ends meet in these difficult circumstances. The conditions in which the refugees live coupled with their limited access to work opportunities, have created financial challenges for the refugees in spite of the small financial support the refugees get from the UNHCR. Rental for housing has been a major concern for the Syrian refugees, both before and during COVID-19. “Yes, being indebted to the homeowner with accumulated JD900, led the former to raise complaints against him at the police department threatening to kick him out of the house,” (Cuso 25, M, 37yrs, Irbid villages, July 2020).

The inability to pay rent meant that people became indebted to the owners of the property. One refugee was pressured to leave his home, because he could not pay the month’s

rent. “Yes, we received a notice from the landlord asking us to pay at the beginning of the month, he didn't kick us out, but clearly we were not welcomed and my son felt under pressure so we left the house and found another one. We have borrowed JD400 from friends and relatives,” (CUSO 32, Female 59 years old, from East Amman, Jabal Nasser, July 2020). The average cost of rent for homes/flats for Syrians varied from one area/governorate to another. In Amman, for example the rent ranges around JD350 in North and East Amman and could range around JD130 in North East Amman. Some lived in shacks or tents in Amman and their rents varied between JD18–50. These living spaces lack security and safety grounds, not to mention adequate sanitary services.

Interviewees were critical of the charity and development bodies that did not assist them during the pandemic. “Organizations haven't helped us nor did the governmental initiatives. No support from family or neighbours, no food packages, no medication, nothing, and the governmental support came only for Jordanian citizens. The wage labourers' payments as well.” (Cuso-01, 51 years old, Mafraq City).

Impact on Return

In 2019, a few articles reported that about 150,000 Syrian refugees have opted to go back to their homes in Syria from Jordan (French Press Agency 2019). This voluntary repatriation, taken individually at a small scale, and not institutionally, has been completely halted as a result of the lockdown of 2020 and the closure of the borders. The closure and the spread of the pandemic, however, were not seen to be a major concern for the refugees interviewed, as the majority were not opting to return to Syria, COVID-19 or otherwise, due to fears of military recruitment, instability and paying the price of standing against the regime in Syria. Other concerns were expressed, reflecting their anxiety, uncertainty and powerlessness regarding their broader situation in Jordan.

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► **SUMMARY: Between Two Outbreaks: Syrian Refugees and the Consequences of COVID-19 in Syria and Jordan**

This is a summary of a [research paper](#) by Dr. Omar Asfour and Dr. Hosam Allaham that focuses on the health and health system implications of COVID-19 on Jordan as a major refugee-hosting country and, particularly, for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

This report also compares the COVID-19 response effort in Jordan to the situation across Syria's fragmented health systems. By combining secondary data with perspectives shared by humanitarian stakeholders working inside Syria, the report provides an overview of the Syrian crisis before COVID-19 and considers the adverse consequences of COVID-19 on health systems, economies and overall conditions in Jordan and Syria, and the implications for refugee return in the current context.

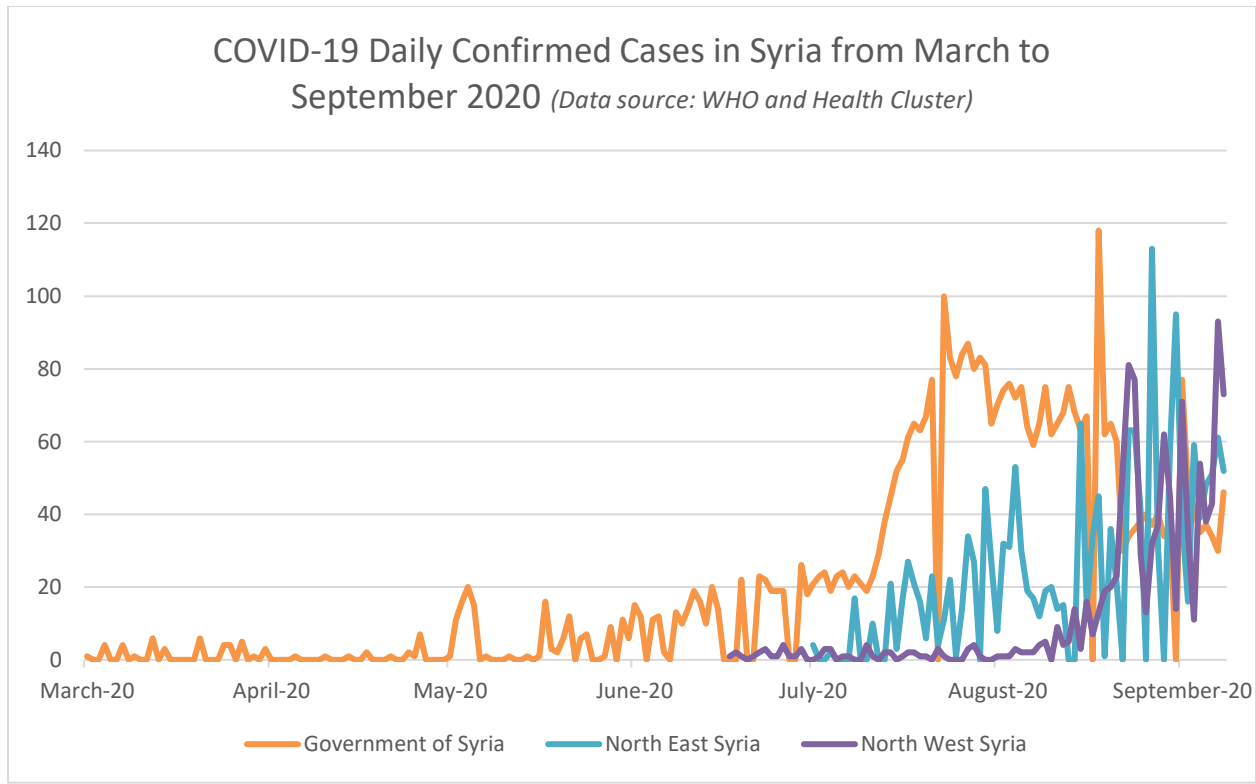
Before COVID-19: Nine Years of the Syrian Crisis

For the past decade, Syria has experienced a complex conflict and a protracted humanitarian crisis. Today, the Syrian crisis has resulted in over 5.5 million officially registered refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2020a). As of August 2020, Jordan hosts nearly 660,000 officially registered refugees (ibid.). Almost four of every five refugees in Jordan live in urban areas rather than in camps (ibid.). Refugees in Jordan are generally vulnerable and economically disadvantaged with around 80 percent living below the poverty line (Tiltnes, Zhang and Pedersen 2019). Both voluntary and involuntary return of refugees is unlikely, as the Syrian conflict remains active, the country is fragmented, destruction is ongoing and the humanitarian crisis continues to worsen.

The Pandemic in Syria

The first COVID-19 confirmed case in Syria was announced toward the end of March followed by the first deaths on March 29 and 30 (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] and WHO 2020b). In the following month, about 44 confirmed cases and one additional death were reported (ibid.). By the end of May, the official number of confirmed cases had nearly doubled (OCHA and WHO 2020c). In June, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases reached about 300 cases out of around 8,000 conducted tests (OCHA and WHO 2020d). However, during this period, there were only six confirmed cases, and one officially reported fatality in areas that are controlled by non-state groups (in Northeast and Northwest Syria (OCHA and WHO 2020c). Nevertheless, it has been suggested that the number of actual COVID-19 cases is significantly higher than the reported cases.

Figure 1. Cumulative Spread of COVID-19 in Syria (March 23 – October 8, 2020)



Sources: WHO COVID19 Dashboard: Syrian Arab Republic (Government of Syria) – (WHO,2020a), NWS Health Cluster (North West Syria) – (Turkey Hub Health Cluster, 2020), NES COVID-19 Taskforce (North East Syria) – (PENDING SOURCE)

The Syrian government has implemented various control measures since the beginning of the pandemic. These measures include partial curfews, lockdown measures, closure of public spaces, home isolation and quarantine for suspected cases, disinfection campaigns, distribution of soap, masks and sanitizers, and awareness-raising (OCHA and WHO 2020g; 2020i; Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme 2020a; 2020b). However, due to pressures to re-open the economy, the government began easing these measures around May 2020. Public spaces were allowed to reopen and public transportation returned to almost normal. Physical distancing remains a requirement, even though adherence to these requirements is not at optimal levels. Lockdowns on some communities continued (OCHA and WHO 2020a; 2020c). It is reported, however, that the government maintained full control over awareness-raising and any outreach campaigns. Furthermore, the health-care system in Syria has been significantly weakened over the past decade, particularly from continuous attacks and destruction. It has been estimated that the maximum number of COVID-19 cases

that the country could adequately treat is around 6,000 patients with the current capacity of around 300 ventilators and intensive care unit beds (Gharibah and Mehchi 2020).

Economic Impact

It is estimated that almost 80 percent of the Syrian population was already living below the poverty line with high levels of food insecurity when the COVID-19 pandemic began (OCHA and WHO 2020c). Since March 2020, there has been a significant increase in prices and a severe shortage in essential goods. (OCHA and WHO 2020e). Prices for face masks are reported to have increased almost fifty-fold, while fuel prices have more than doubled (ibid.). More than 300,000 individuals are estimated to have lost their jobs and applied for official assistance (OCHA and WHO 2020a). While the government reportedly planned to disburse funds to about 100,000 individuals, only 5,000 people had received aid as of June 2020. (ibid.). In an attempt to salvage the economy, the government has imposed strict measures to ensure compliance with official prices of essential goods, while the exchange rate of the Syrian pound has continued to drop (OCHA and WHO 2020e).

The Pandemic in Jordan

There had been no single confirmed COVID-19 case among Syrian refugees in Jordan until the end of August. However, as Jordan entered a community transmission phase of the outbreak, five cases were confirmed in Za'atari and Azraq camps (WHO 2020b; UNHCR 2020b). All confirmed cases are transferred to the isolation centres in the Dead Sea area, and contact tracing is carried out by health authorities in collaboration with the UNHCR and health actors inside the camps (ibid.). The risk of rapid COVID-19 transmission in camps is high due to inadequate infrastructure and crowded living conditions. Syrian refugee camps, in particular, have been subject to extreme lockdown. The lockdown was "cruel and inhumane," as described by a humanitarian worker who has regularly provided health services in the Za'atari camp for several years. Residents' movement to and from the camp was completely suspended for more than two months. Many camp residents who were on temporary leave from the camp were stranded on the outside and not allowed to enter, which resulted in additional pressure and constraints on families and children.

Authorities had previously shown some leniency toward illegal movement across camp borders. However, they have responded violently to all unlawful attempts to escape or return to the camp since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of shops inside the camp, which contribute significantly to the camp's internal economy, went bankrupt. Supply chains were disrupted. Temporary workers who were dependent on daily work outside the

camp lost their regular access to income and livelihoods. Health-care services inside the camp continued at reduced capacities, as did other humanitarian services. Many patients who required specialized treatment were denied proper care. The referral process to outside hospitals, as explained by a health-care practitioner in the camp, was already a slow and complicated process. Since the onset of COVID-19, this process has become futile for refugees in Jordan. In one example, a patient in his 40s had developed sudden hematuria. In the primary health-care centre, he had to wait for an appointment. He needed advanced imaging that is not available in the camp. The referral process took several weeks before he managed to leave the camp during the Eid holidays and see a private doctor afterward. Additionally, many refugees lost access to assistance because the UNHCR could not renew their official documents and registrations during the lockdown.

Implications for Refugee Return

Three-quarters of Syrians in Jordan, both refugees and non-officially registered refugees, intend to return to Syria at some point in the future (Morris 2019). It has been estimated that in the past few years about five percent of Syrian refugees in Jordan have crossed the border back into Syria (Edwards and Al-Hourani 2019), although it is unclear whether those who returned planned to stay. Observers suggest that many returnees have already secured permission to return to Jordan. Returnees are mostly escaping the harsh economic realities in Jordan and the lack of jobs and opportunities (ibid.). According to our interviewees, refugees might return to Syria for a variety of reasons, including economic pressure and minimal opportunities in Jordan. Perhaps, before the recent financial crisis in Syria, some refugees may have perceived better economic opportunities in Syria in comparison to Jordan. Other returnees may have other personal or family reasons for returning. They may still have their social support networks in Syria or have returned temporarily for specific reasons, such as selling or registering their properties. However, the majority of refugees in Jordan are reluctant to return now due to uncertainties beyond the border, including fears of arrest and detention (ibid.).

A general perception among the humanitarian workers interviewed for this report is that very few refugees had considered returning to Syria before the pandemic due to the deterioration of the Syrian economy and security concerns. It is even more unlikely now that refugees are considering returning to Syria due to the spread of COVID-19 and the nearly collapsed economy. However, the refugee situation in Jordan continues to become more challenging, with few opportunities to integrate long-term into Jordanian society. Furthermore, the Jordanian host population may become less hospitable over time. Refugees may not have easy access to essential services. However, even with these multiple challenges, Jordan

remains a better option than the current Syrian situation with its soaring prices, diminished services and COVID-19. According to a Syrian humanitarian worker in Jordan, "Refugees who have returned to Syria must have enormously compelling reasons. Otherwise, it is unlikely that Syrians would want to move back to Syria voluntarily."

Conclusion

Refugees and displaced persons worldwide have been among the most affected by this global pandemic. COVID-19 has resulted in a global crisis, and those who have been the most vulnerable before this global crisis are now even more exposed. Syrian refugees living in Jordan are no different. They are trapped in the middle, between two outbreaks and two economically challenging situations. The violence and fighting might have begun to wind down in some parts of Syria, but conditions in Syria are continuing to worsen due to the compounded economic and health crises. Jordan is also going through tough times, socially and economically, and Syrian refugees are and will continue to be among those most impacted.

It is unlikely that Syrian refugees in Jordan will consider a return to Syria in the foreseeable future due to their home country's collapsed economy and dire health situations. About half of the Syrian refugees in Jordan come from Dara'a and Rural Damascus (UNHCR 2019), two governorates that have been subjected to brutal violence and destruction during the conflict and that have been considered to be opposition strongholds by the government. The availability of basic and essential services in these areas is still questionable with many suggesting that these areas have been subject to retaliatory negligence by the Syrian government (Daher 2019; HRW 2019; OCHA 2019). Many refugees fear the unknown that await them back in Syria, such as potential arrest and detention. For many, homes and properties are lost, and they do not feel it is safe to return. The recent COVID-19 outbreak, and the lack of trust in the public health system in Syria, have only reinforced the desires of refugees to remain in Jordan for the near future.

Nevertheless, it appears that the relationship between Jordanian authorities and Syrians in Jordan is heading towards a more difficult phase. On the one hand, the Jordanian government is confronting an economic recession and increased demands for services. For example, it is estimated that the number of Jordanian students who transferred from private to public schools this year reached an unprecedented number of over 50,000 students. On the other hand, Syrian refugees, among other refugees in Jordan, are likely to remain disproportionately affected by the economic situation in Jordan. Due to the impact on the global economy, the situation for Syrian refugees in Jordan may become even more

complicated with an expected decrease in the humanitarian funds available for Syrians in Jordan. Out of the estimated US\$8.6 billion assistance requirements for Syria and Syrian refugees in hosting countries, the international donors have pledged US\$5.5 billion at the Brussels IV Council in June 2020 (European Council 2020).

The delivery of humanitarian assistance and the protection of vulnerable refugees remains an important priority. The COVID-19 pandemic should not be an excuse for hosting governments and the global community to abandon their moral responsibilities toward refugees. The options for the Jordanian authorities are limited. As recommended by the co-chairs of the Brussels IV Conference, Jordanian authorities have to maintain their vulnerability-based approach to ensure effective responses to the population's basic needs. After almost 10 years, Syrian refugees are an essential component of the workforce in Jordan (ibid.). Authorities need to plan for integrating Syrian workforce into the local market. They can contribute to the economic growth and these contributions may reduce the burden on public services in Jordan. However, many of the refugees will remain vulnerable, and authorities should provide for all vulnerable populations on the basis of vulnerability, and not their country of origin. The Jordanian government must also maintain its advocacy efforts to mobilize resources and foreign assistance. This assistance should be channelled toward creating sustainable economic opportunities for both refugees and vulnerable Jordanians.

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