

The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Regional and Human Security Implications

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The Refugee Population: An Overview

Defined as the “worst humanitarian disaster since the end of the cold war,”¹ the Syrian civil war has to date claimed over 200,000 casualties, including over 8,000 documented killings of children under eighteen years of age.² In a country of approximately 22 million people, the bloody and prolonged conflict has resulted in 7.6 million internally displaced persons and an additional 3.2 million refugees, as well as approximately 12.2 million people (more than 1 in 2 Syrians) in need of humanitarian aid to survive.³ Over 700,000 Syrians have registered as refugees with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2014 alone, with an average of approximately 70,000 Syrians fleeing their country every month.⁴ Even though the average monthly number of new refugees has declined since 2013, the regional crisis is by no means subsiding, especially as it becomes clear that returning to Syria will not be a viable option in the short or medium term.

To date, the humanitarian cost of the crisis has been paid mainly by Syria’s neighbors, with Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey currently hosting over 600,000, 1.14 million, and 1.6 million refugees, respectively, and with a smaller number of Syrians seeking shelter in Egypt (over 140,000) and Iraq (over 220,000).⁵ In reality, the number of Syrians present in these countries is higher than the official UNHCR figure of registered refugees, as a number of Syrians choose not to register, for reasons that range from fearing the consequences of having their names in official records, to lacking either proper information or access to the registration points.

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In Jordan, a country of approximately 6.5 million, Syrian refugees, now equivalent to roughly 9-10 percent of the population, are mostly concentrated in urban centers in the center and north of the country, with approximately 80,000 Syrians living in Zaatari, the largest refugee camp in the country.⁶ In Lebanon, the number of refugees dispersed over 1,000 different municipalities, predominantly in the Bekaa valley and the northern areas of the country,⁷ is currently equivalent to 26 percent of the Lebanese population. And whereas 1.6 million refugees is a small number compared to Turkey's population of over 76 million people, still, over 80 percent of the refugee population is concentrated chiefly outside of camps in five provinces in the south and southeastern Turkey, thus representing a substantial presence and having a significant impact on each of these areas.⁸ In terms of the demographic characteristics of the refugee population, the gender distribution reveals a slight imbalance between women (50.8 percent) and men (49.1 percent), as well as a high percentage of refugees under age 17 (53 percent). These figures should be juxtaposed with data on Syria's pre-war demographic distribution, when the population under age 20 represented roughly 46 percent of the population and where males represented a slight majority.⁹

In addition, the Syrian civil war has resulted in a number of non-Syrian refugees. First and foremost are Palestinians: since the beginning of the war, of the approximately 560,000 registered Palestinian refugees in Syria, over 50 percent have been displaced within the country, with an additional 12 percent seeking shelter in Lebanon (with over 40,000 registered to date, joining the 450,000 Palestinians refugees already present); Jordan (approximately 14,000); and Gaza, Egypt, and Turkey.¹⁰ In addition, countries such as Lebanon have also seen as many as 50,000 "returnees" resettling in the country, increasing the list of vulnerable sectors of the population.¹¹

The Impact of the Crisis: Critical Areas of Intervention

The exponential influx of refugees in the Middle East in the past three years has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises the international community has faced in the past few decades. Some of the critical challenges and areas of intervention engaging the international community include:

Protection: Ensuring legal, physical, and psychological protection to the refugee population is a sine qua non in meeting the ongoing crisis. Indeed, lack of basic security takes a direct toll and exerts a negative impact on virtually all assistance programs: for example, lack of security keeps

children out of school – leading parents to prevent them from traveling alone to the educational facilities; or forces women to stay at home and forego education and employment opportunities. Even access to basic health care can be substantially impaired by an insecure environment.

As such, providing security for the vulnerable refugee population is a challenge both within and outside refugee camps. Refugee camps can present significant security challenges by providing the breeding ground for organized criminal groups as well as for the recruitment of fighters. At the same time, securing a widely dispersed refugee population – often living in informal settlements – represents a different but just as daunting task. Vulnerable groups are especially affected, with women and girls, particularly women who fled Syria alone or with their children, vulnerable to sexual and verbal harassment outside the home, as well as to a heightened risk of domestic violence or abuse.¹² Children, particularly unaccompanied minors, are another especially vulnerable group: with insecure and impoverished living conditions, children are exposed to various forms of exploitation, from child labor to sexual violence, to recruitment and employment by armed and criminal groups. Child marriage has also become increasingly common among Syrians since the beginning of the war: for instance, a Save the Children 2014 report stated that “early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls in Jordan has doubled since the onset of war,” growing from 13 percent to 32 percent between 2011 and 2014.¹³

In addition to securing refugee camps, communities, individuals, and especially vulnerable populations, protection also concerns the refugees’ legal status, beginning with ensuring that each refugee is able to register and obtain a recognized legal status in the host country and preventing forced repatriation as well as statelessness. With both Jordan and Lebanon not having ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention,¹⁴ the UNHCR works with the host countries through separate Memorandums of Understanding that allow the agency to operate and keeps both countries committed to the general customary international law principle of non-refoulement.

Lebanon has further relied on a previous bilateral agreement with Syria to allow Syrians to obtain residency permits in Lebanon. However, Syrians who have entered the country through unofficial crossings or are unable to renew their permits are considered as being in the country illegally, thus creating a worrisome loophole in the protection regime.¹⁵ Jordan has a different system in place, allowing Syrian refugees to register with UNHCR and reside in ad hoc camps, with a bailout system that allows refugees to

reside outside of camps if “sponsored” by a Jordanian. It conditions their right to work on getting a permit, which is, in turn, costly and difficult to obtain.¹⁶ Turkey has ratified the Refugee Convention but applies it according to its original scope, thus awarding refugee status only to refugees from Europe. The country has nevertheless devised a so-called Temporary Protection Regime for Syrian refugees and, since April 2014, the Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection guarantees legal presence in Turkey, temporary residence permits to settle in most of the country, access (with an identity card) to basic services, and universal access to health care.¹⁷ While in theory Syrian “guests” can apply for a work permit, in practice obtaining such a document is extremely difficult.¹⁸

Shelter: According to UN estimates, up to 85 percent of Syrian refugees live outside of refugee camps, scattered in both urban and rural settings.¹⁹ In Jordan, 18 percent of Syrian refugees live in camps, chiefly Zaatari and Azraq.²⁰ Turkey has accommodated roughly 20 percent of the refugee population in 22 camps that were initially described as “the best refugee camps ever seen,” but which are under increasing strain by the prolonged crisis.²¹ In Lebanon, all Syrians are accommodated outside camps, as domestic political realities have led the country to oppose their construction.

Assistance in finding adequate shelter and providing services to the refugee population dispersed outside the camps has been a significant challenge for international and local stakeholders alike. Moreover, with the majority of Syrians needing shelter, the number of available accommodations has declined. In turn, rental prices have increased significantly in all areas with a high concentration of refugees, placing an additional strain on the vulnerable refugee population as well as on the host communities. Most refugees are indeed in need of assistance for rent, and financial considerations can prevent refugees from finding adequate housing, forcing them to live in sub-standard accommodations such as abandoned or unfinished buildings or in informal dwellings, which in numerous cases lack adequate access to water, sanitation, waste management, or electricity and are unfit for the winter season.

Health and Education: Along with the housing shortage, the refugee influx has also had direct repercussions on the states’ capacity to deliver social services, with the host countries’ health and educational systems, especially in the cases of Lebanon and Jordan, stretched beyond their limits. For the health sector the pressure derives from a substantial increase in need, demand, and costs as well as in shortages of personnel and structures,

resulting in an overall deterioration of the system for the refugee and host community alike. Poor and unsanitary living conditions and limited access to basic health services also pose an added risk in terms of both preventing and treating epidemics and outbreaks of infections while contributing to a worsening of the target population's health. Lack of heating or damp housing conditions, for example, can lead to respiratory diseases such as asthma, allergies, and acute bronchitis.²²

In addition, lack of proper documentation or financial factors complicate the question of access, with the latter factor especially relevant in Lebanon, where the health system is privatized (despite the fact that the international community subsidizes a large number of health-related expenses), as opposed to Jordan or Turkey, where free public health care is generally available. Lack of adequate access to the medical system takes an especially high toll on the elderly refugee population, as well as on Syrians with disabilities, chronic conditions, or in need of psychological assistance.²³ This is especially relevant given the high percentage of Syrian refugees with impairments: for instance, a HelpAge International and Handicap International survey in 2014 found that "30 per cent of refugees have specific needs."²⁴

Providing access to education has been similarly complex, with the international community and the host governments struggling to accommodate Syrian children and with the local educational system increasingly overcrowded, under financial strain, and with overworked personnel. For example, in Lebanon, the number of Syrian school-aged children surpasses the number of Lebanese children in the public school system.²⁵ Additional factors, including lack of proper documentation, costs of education, distance from school, safety issues, cultural or language barriers, strong differences in the curriculum, or the need to work to support the household have kept Syrian children out of schools, a trend with extremely negative long term consequences. Again with respect to Lebanon, the International Labour Organization reports that the gross enrollment rate (defined as "the number of children enrolled in a level, regardless of age, divided by the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the same level")²⁶ for Syrian refugees is around 55 percent for primary education (6-10 years) but as low as 13 percent for secondary education (11-15 years), well below both the Lebanese and the Syrian pre-war average.²⁷ While there seems to be substantial gender parity when it comes to enrollment in primary schools, when it comes to secondary education boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school to start working.²⁸ Children outside

refugee camps are more likely to be out of school. For example, in the case of Turkey, whereas roughly 83 percent of Syrian children age 6-11 attend school within the camps, that number drops to 14 percent when it comes to refugees living outside the camps.²⁹ And even Jordan, the country that fares the best out of the three in terms of percentages of children age 5-17 enrolled in formal education, has only a 52 percent enrollment rate.³⁰

Employment: The massive refugee flows have in some cases resulted in the saturation of the job market, with a widespread perception in host communities that refugees have contributed to both a general rise in unemployment rates along with a decrease in wages. This is especially the case as the refugee population, often driven by the desperation of their circumstances and/or unable to obtain the proper work permits, agree to work for lower wages, harsher conditions, and fewer rights than their counterparts in the host communities. For example, the International Rescue Committee estimates that wages in the service and agricultural sectors have dropped as much as 50 percent in Lebanon between 2011 and 2013.³¹ Along with the competition with local workers, Syrian refugees have also opened informal businesses that sell below market prices, further contributing to the “race to the bottom.”

A 2013 International Labour Organization assessment of the patterns of employment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon highlighted that the majority of the refugees work in unskilled or semi-skilled, often informal or temporary/seasonal jobs – from agriculture to domestic work to construction – that generally fail to offer steady and adequate income, job security, or work benefits.³² Significantly, patterns of both average income and unemployment tend to reflect a gender gap, with male unemployment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon at roughly 30 percent (versus 68 percent of women) and with the average monthly income at \$287 for male workers (against the \$448 minimum wage) versus \$165 for female workers.³³ An analysis of patterns of employment in both Jordan and Turkey confirms these same trends, with refugees overwhelmingly lacking formalized, skilled, and regular jobs and often employed as “illegal workers” due to the limits in the legal framework. In addition, insufficient and unsteady income in turn fosters greater dependence on international assistance to survive – for example, through food parcels, food vouchers, or pre-paid credit card programs – while forcing more refugees to deplete their resources and savings and go into debt.³⁴ The consequences of these insecure economic conditions are pervasive and include higher risks of contracting debts and exploitation;

higher percentage of food insecurity, malnutrition, and anemia;³⁵ increased rates of child labor and child marriage; and the inability to afford adequate shelter, healthcare, or basic services.

The Impact of the Crisis: Host Community Resilience

This brief overview clearly details the massive impact of the regional refugee crisis on the host countries' social services and job markets, as well as on housing, electricity, sanitation, and water resources. The massive refugee influx has also impacted negatively on the host countries' economies.

In the case of Lebanon, a 2013 World Bank assessment found that the Syrian civil war had strained Lebanon's already frail public finances and widened the fiscal deficit, with the state needing to spend an additional \$2.5 billion simply to restore access and quality of services to pre-Syrian civil war levels, and with the Lebanese trade and tourism sectors especially suffering.³⁶ Given the rising prices and unemployment, ordinary Lebanese families are paying directly for the Syrian crisis, with the resulting estimate that at least 170,000 Lebanese will have been pushed into poverty by the end of 2014.³⁷ The situation is worsened by the fact that a large number of refugees have settled in areas of Lebanon such as the Bekaa Valley and the north of the country that have historically been more economically marginalized and underdeveloped in terms of social services and infrastructure.

Economic and political pressures in host countries have led in turn to tensions at the social level, both between the refugee population and the local residents and, especially in the case of Lebanon, between different politico-sectarian sectors of society that support opposite sides in the Syrian civil war, resulting in a general deterioration in social cohesion.

This situation has not only taken a toll on the Syrian refugee population, an already vulnerable group, but has also created massive domestic pressure, ultimately shaking the host communities to their core. The severe economic burden of the crisis, the potential social tensions, and the crystallizing perception that the refugee crisis will not subside in the near future have led to attempts to further restrict and regulate refugee flows as well as to further limit the current refugees' rights and benefits in the host countries. These join the preexisting exceptions to the open borders policies: for example, Amnesty International reported that Lebanon was already restricting entry for Palestinian refugees, while Jordan was outright denying it, with both Jordan and Turkey at times preventing entry to those who lacked identity documents (and in the case of Turkey resulting in internally displaced

persons camps mushrooming at the border between Syrian and Turkey).³⁸ However, restrictions further increased in late 2014, with reports surfacing of forcible deportation of refugees back to Syria, in violation of international law.³⁹ In a telling declaration in early October 2014, Lebanese Social Affairs Minister Rashid Derbas stated that apart from “humanitarian exceptions,” the country “no longer officially receives any displaced Syrians.”⁴⁰

Managing the Crisis and Increasing Sustainability: An International Priority

The regional refugee crisis has indisputable and far reaching political, social, economic, and security implications. First, the dire conditions facing a large part of the refugee population directly undermine all dimensions of their human security (from the personal, to economic and environmental, to health and food security). Second, the refugees’ problems and hardships cannot be seen as self-contained. On the contrary, they deeply affect their host countries’ resilience and domestic stability, to the detriment of the host societies’ human security. Indeed, the study emphasizes how the refugee crisis has severely undermined the host countries’ resilience, as well as their economic performance, while also furthering social tensions. Clearly, each host country’s preexisting social, political, and economic context equips it in a different way to deal with these destabilizing trends, but the fact that even the more prosperous and resilient Turkish state is starting to face significant pressure in tackling the refugee crisis demonstrates the magnitude of the challenge.

The cumulative effect of the ongoing crisis on the main host countries should be seen as a potential source of short term domestic and regional instability at the economic, political, and ultimately security levels. And if in the short term the failure to tackle the crisis only adds pressure to an already shaky regional security landscape, the lack of serious investments in the long term integration or resettlement of refugee communities could lead to the rise of a new group of economically deprived and politically marginalized second class citizens throughout the Levant, with negative consequences in terms of human development, political stability, and security.

To respond to the ongoing humanitarian emergency, the international community has relied on an inter-agency Regional Response Plan (RRP) that brings together over 100 stakeholders between UN agencies and NGOs,⁴¹ as well as on bilateral and multi-lateral assistance to the host

countries and communities. The RRP appeal for 2014, set at \$3.7 billion to sustain the emergency assistance and relief efforts, is one of the largest ever presented in United Nations history. When adding appeals from other agencies and host governments, the sum rises to a staggering \$7.7 billion.⁴² The 2015 UN appeal for the sum of \$8.4 billion (with \$5.5 billion earmarked for the regional refugee and residence plan) similarly shows that the emergency is far from subsiding.⁴³

Yet despite the gravity and urgency of the situation and the clear importance of preventing a further escalation of the crisis, the international assistance efforts are increasingly more cash-stripped, with the RPP having obtained only 54 percent of the needed funds.⁴⁴ The lack of funds will clearly have a direct and potentially devastating impact on access to health, education, shelter, water, and sanitation, while also compromising the refugees' food security and putting even more pressure on the already frail host communities. In turn, this can not only push the host governments to the brink, but it can also fuel preexisting political, sectarian, or political tensions between host and refugee communities. In this context, the very first priority of the international community must be to step up its commitment and prevent the cutting of vital assistance programs by fully funding the humanitarian assistance efforts.

Again, stepping in to ensure the funding of the refugee crisis should be seen as a key ingredient in any longer term plan to stabilize the region and keep extremism at bay. In this sense, the "soft security" focus on managing the humanitarian crisis and preventing a collapse of the host states should be seen as at least as important as the hard security efforts to downgrade and destroy the Islamic State. Failing to see the integrated nature of human and hard security threats to the region represents, to date, one of the larger failures in the international community's approach to the Syrian civil war and its regional spillover.

Another indirect way to reduce the pressure of the regional crisis is for the international community to substantially step up its commitment to resettlement. UNHCR has expressed hope to resettle an estimated 130,000 Syrian between now and 2016,⁴⁵ but to date that seems a particularly elusive goal. With the exception of Germany and to a lesser degree Sweden, European countries in particular lag behind, with countries like France having pledged to resettle only 500 refugees.⁴⁶ Indeed, by and large European governments, with increasingly more securitized immigration policies and facing a generally reluctant public opinion when it comes to refugee

absorption, have taken only small steps with respect to resettlement. Given the general political climate in Europe, it is unlikely this policy stance will change substantively in 2015.

In the longer term, preventing a further deterioration of the crisis also requires the international community to invest more in boosting the host communities' economies and infrastructure, so that they can better cope with the refugee crisis as well as with the increased vulnerabilities and needs of the local populations. Indeed, given the precarious context and the long term outlook of the crisis, investing in the long term development and resilience of the host communities should be seen as an outmost priority. This does not just require additional funds to deal with the refugee crisis and the increased needs of the local population, but also working to invest in long term economic development, institutional capacity building, and security sector assistance.

Finally, there needs to be a clear focus on long term development and integration, which in turn requires host governments to relinquish their approach to treating refugees as "temporary guests." In this sense, a key priority should be on livelihood and income generation, including job creation, lending geared to fostering micro-enterprise, and vocational training. Clearly this approach also requires a shift in legal frameworks, easing the conditions for refugees to obtain work permits, and investing in sensible social and labor policies.

In dealing with the Syrian civil war, the international community seems to have split the focus between the "military-security" dimension of the conflict and the "humanitarian" aspect, with the regional refugee crisis largely analyzed through the humanitarian lens. While understandable, this approach has de facto created an artificial separation between regional and human security concerns.

Put simply: the economic, political, and social impact of the ongoing refugee crisis should not be seen solely through the humanitarian lens. Successfully tackling the emergency and boosting the long term resilience of both refugee and host communities is also a vital strategic priority to prevent the long term destabilization and implosion of the entire Levant. The relative lethargy with which the international community has reacted to the challenge reflects a fundamental underestimation of the nature of the crisis and its long term regional repercussions in terms of regional stability and resilience, but also in relation to issues such as radicalization

and the rise of uncontrolled migratory flows, two issues that have been at the forefront of the European security agenda for the Mediterranean.

Notes

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