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## SYRIAN REFUGEES: ANXIOUS NEIGHBORS STRETCHED THIN

Since early 2012, Lebanon and Jordan have seen a dramatic increase in the number of refugees crossing their borders as the Syrian government intensifies its crackdown on opposition groups. Despite the fact that neither country has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol, both have accommodated those fleeing Syria, providing services and assistance despite their own strained resources. As host countries, Lebanon and Jordan are at a breaking point and need robust support – for both the host communities and the refugee populations – in order to maintain the safe havens they currently offer. The international community must act by creating a solid refugee response that supports those in need and preserves regional stability.

### BACKGROUND

Beginning in the spring of 2011, a popular uprising and subsequent government crackdown in Syria has forced large numbers of people from their homes, and in many cases from the country entirely. Over 97,000 Syrian refugees are now registered in surrounding countries, with more than 55,000 of them in Lebanon and Jordan

combined. Thousands more are waiting to register or have been identified as needing assistance, and there are sometimes hundreds of new arrivals weekly.

Historically, the people living along the Lebanon-Syria-Jordan borders have had close cultural, familial, and commercial ties. As a result, some Syrians who were able to leave arrived in Lebanon and Jordan to be welcomed by family

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ Donors, in particular the U.S. and European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), should immediately respond to the UN's \$193 million revised Syria Regional Response Plan with an increase in funding. The appeal is only 20 per cent funded halfway into the year.
- ❑ To encourage the governments of Lebanon and Jordan to continue their positive response to Syrian refugees and to maintain open borders, the U.S. and other donor countries should provide additional development assistance to communities hosting Syrian refugees.
- ❑ The government of Lebanon should prioritize establishing the Higher Relief Commission's (HRC) work and coordination

process countrywide in order to provide assistance beyond the North.

- ❑ In Jordan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should create and use a tracking system for refugees being bailed out of transit centers in order to identify the most vulnerable. It should also provide targeted services in urban areas, as well as monitor potential protection issues like child labor and the trafficking of women.

- ❑ The Jordanian government must designate an effective focal point to coordinate its response to Syrian refugees and channel financial donations. The U.S. and EU should support Jordan in this effort.

members, friends, acquaintances, or communities where they are comfortable and can find resources. However, as more and more Syrians without such connections are displaced by continuing violence, recent arrivals increasingly find themselves on their own in a foreign country, suffering the plight of a more “traditional” refugee population. In addition, both Lebanon and Jordan are among the main hosts for Palestinian and Iraqi refugees and continue to offer support to those populations.

## **NEED FOR INCREASED FUNDING**

The initial response in Lebanon and Jordan to the Syrian refugee population has been positive: the borders remain open; there have been no reports of abuse by host country authorities; refugees have access to services; and the coordination among the UN agencies, INGOs, and NGOs is useful and improving. But providing humanitarian assistance to refugees in Lebanon and Jordan has been hampered by the difficulty in determining who has entered the countries, where they are living, and what their needs are. Where Syrian refugees live with host families, resources are severely limited. Particularly in urban settings, refugees and their hosts confront increasing costs of living, difficulty finding affordable shelter, scarce employment opportunities, and a limited services network. Such hardships are compounded by a reluctance to come forward and register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for fear that names, photos, and personal information may be used by host governments to target and abuse refugees or shared with Syrian authorities.

In March 2012, UNHCR appealed for \$84.1 million to fund the regional response to Syrian refugees. Only three months later, the agency put forth a revised request for \$193 million in light of the increasing number of people leaving Syria for neighboring countries. At the time of that revision, the original appeal was still less than half-funded, significantly limiting services in Lebanon and Jordan. The need for adequate funding for UNHCR’s work is growing along with the size of the refugee population. Donors, in particular the U.S. and the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), should immediately respond to the UN’s revised request with an increase in funding.

## **HOST COMMUNITIES AND LONG-TERM SUPPORT**

While the Lebanese and Jordanian people have been generous and welcoming to the fleeing Syrians, their ability to continue supporting their guests is limited. In Lebanon, every community hosting Syrian refugees that RI visited

expressed concerns that they had reached their limit and could not absorb more. In northern Lebanon and the Beqa’a Valley, employment opportunities are already inadequate and functional living spaces are scarce. The addition of 20,000-plus Syrians seeking work has only increased the pressure on these areas. While many Syrian refugees are living with friends and relatives, more and more are arriving without such connections. The governments of Lebanon and Jordan, UNHCR, and local NGOs are currently providing a range of humanitarian services for refugees, including protection, food, shelter, health care, and education. But as the numbers continue to increase, the burden on service providers is growing.

In both countries, established cross-border employment and commerce that supported communities has been drastically curtailed. As a result, the regional economy has slowed down, livelihoods have disappeared, and everyone is having more trouble making ends meet. Relations between host communities and refugee populations will likely become increasingly tense as newcomers compete for scarce resources. Moreover, the delicate political situations in Lebanon and Jordan could easily turn confrontational. Already in Lebanon there have been conflicts between pro- and anti-Assad groups. With the difficulty of supporting Syrian refugees thrown into the mix, such political disagreements could easily widen into larger-scale cross-border conflicts between host countries and Syria. Providing adequate assistance to Lebanon and Jordan that benefits both their own citizens and the refugees will improve conditions for refugee populations in the short term, while ensuring there is no backlash from host communities in the long term.

It is quite possible that Syrian refugees may be living in host countries for an extended period of time. Aid agencies in both countries should begin now to identify livelihood possibilities for members of the host communities as well as Syrian refugees, with an eye toward fostering refugees’ self-sufficiency and equipping communities to deal with the long-term impacts of their guests. As the ongoing refugee registration process reveals the true number of refugees in the country, their locations, and their needs, the U.S. and ECHO must increase funding of the revised response plan so that international and local non-governmental organizations can provide for the general well-being of local and refugee populations alike.

Additionally, in Jordan there are several transit centers on the northern border that house refugees entering from Syria without proper documentation. To be released from these transit centers, a Jordanian sponsor must pay a per-person

fee to “bail out” an individual or family group and agree to be responsible for them. While the ability to leave the transit center and live in a more conventional community is important, there have been reports of Jordanian sponsors abusing the system. Refugees claim that some sponsors ask for large sums of money in return for paying their “bail out” fees and signing the guarantee document. If refugee families cannot pay up-front and accrue debts, there is the potential for serious abuse such as trafficking and child labor. UNHCR has so far not tracked the individual circumstances of Syrians who leave the transit centers and move into the wider community. As a matter of protection, establishing a system that follows these people and ensures their well-being is crucial.

### **URGENT ASSISTANCE REQUIRED**

In Lebanon, UNHCR continues to register refugees in the northern region of Akkar, and to some extent in Tripoli. It has also recently begun registration activities in the Beqa’a region. The centralized registration centers being used in these areas should help UNHCR and its partners to understand where refugees are living, how vulnerable they are, and what services they need most urgently. However, it was immediately apparent in the communities RI visited – particularly in the Beqa’a – that shelter remains a serious concern. Lebanese host families expressed concerns about paying their utility and water bills, and about how long they could continue to offer space in their homes when work is scarce and their own families are in need. In some areas, collective shelters are standing but are not connected to main water systems. Sanitation services and trash removal are infrequent, and utility bills are too high for people to pay. These shortfalls undermine the rest of the response: food distributions become less useful if people cannot afford gas for cooking, while medical care – already financially out of reach for refugees in many cases – is less effective in an unhealthy home environment.

In Jordan, Syrian refugees who leave the northern transit centers and move on to urban areas are finding housing unaffordable. Some have even tried to return to the transit centers after discovering they had no way to pay their rent outside. The sharp rise in demand for accommodation has caused monthly rates to double in some areas, making it virtually impossible for average Jordanians or Syrian newcomers to afford living space. Those without a regular living situation may subsequently miss out on additional help like food and blanket distributions, the ability to put their children into the school system, and information on obtaining medical care. Almost all of the urban refugees in Jordan expressed a need for cash assistance to cover the high cost

of rent and daily living expenses like food. While plans for cash assistance projects have been under discussion for some time, they have yet to be implemented on a large scale. Services like medical care and education have been adequate for the Syrian refugee population in Jordan, but the basic needs must still be addressed more effectively by UN agencies and INGOs.

In Lebanon, a food voucher system is in place in the Beqa’a, and in Jordan there have been some limited cash assistance programs to help with the costs of housing and food. However, a rapid shift to more widespread cash assistance programs would benefit Syrian refugees in both countries. Refugees need support for rent, food, and non-food items, as do host communities in light of the dwindling cross-border commerce. Cash assistance has proven to be useful in non-camp situations, but should be term-limited and regularly assessed in order not to hinder progress toward self-sufficiency.

### **UNDERSERVED AREAS**

In Lebanon’s Beqa’a Valley, local governments in the various municipalities have been responding diligently to the needs of the Syrian refugees joining their communities. While some of them feel confident about their ability to continue assistance, others think they would benefit from some support from the central government. The main government agency providing humanitarian aid is the Higher Relief Commission (HRC), and the government of Lebanon recently decided to allow the HRC to work in the region. However before its work can begin, there must be established processes for coordination and service provision. Creating these policies in a timely manner will ensure that the most vulnerable in the region receive the assistance they need.

UNHCR and its partners are already working in the Beqa’a to register people and to provide shelter, food, and medical care. But cooperation with the government of Lebanon will bring more funding and capacity to services that are under strain. At the moment, when gaps in services open up in one region, refugees will sometimes move to another region – often the North – where services are better-established, coordinated, and funded. This in turn puts more pressure on services in that area – both for Syrians and locals. For example, medical clinics serving refugees also have a history of assisting Lebanese patients. Improving services in currently underserved areas like the Beqa’a will support the local communities, provide greater capacity to assist refugees, and make sure the burden of care is spread more equally.

In Jordan, there is a similar lack of coordinated services for refugees in the urban context, especially near the transit centers in the north. UNHCR (and therefore its partners) has been mandated to work mostly in the centers themselves, where the various services are generally adequate. Because of this focus, these same organizations are not able to similarly serve the urban refugee population nearby, which lacks food, medical care, housing, and protection services. Countrywide, the registration processes in Jordan have been quite inclusive and accessible. But the benefits of registration unfortunately do not extend past that initial contact with UNHCR in the region of the transit centers. Some INGOs and CBOs have tried to fill in the gaps with food distributions, medical attention, and educational programs for children. But in the absence of a well-coordinated network in this region, services and distributions have been sporadic. Refugees appear to be falling through the cracks and unclear about where to turn for help.

## COORDINATION IN JORDAN

In Jordan, there is a distinct lack of coordination of the refugee response within the government. No single department or person has been designated to oversee the response to Syrian refugees in the country, making it almost impossible for both international and local NGOs to know where to go when they need permission for their work, approval for a project, or information on the government's own response and plans. Some of the aid workers RI spoke to fear there will be a repeat of the problems that held up the response to Iraqi refugees, and articulated the need for a clear and efficient system based on cooperation between the government and the NGOs.

Although the Jordanian government has appointed the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization (JHCO) to direct the refugee response, the organization is generally believed to have no strategy and no coordination plan. All funding for work with Syrian refugees – outside of funding that goes to the various UN agencies – must be approved through this umbrella entity, which has little expertise, few resources, and no specific knowledge of refugee issues or any sort of preparedness plan. JHCO must also approve registration for Jordanian organizations that would like to work with Syrian refugees. Though a number of such organizations have the necessary expertise and can even raise their own funds, the length of time required for the registration process and approval of proposed projects means that there will be long delays before they can begin services.

After its experience with the Iraqi refugee crisis that began in earnest in 2003, Jordan should be able to establish a response to the influx of Syrian refugees within a reasonable amount of time. The initial response to the Iraqis was imperfect, but carried out with good will and real effort. Many improvements have also been made over the ensuing decade: services were created to support both the host population and the arriving refugees, funding was released in a timely manner, and assistance was mainstreamed in many sectors. It is possible to do this with the Syrian refugee population as well, but it will require high-level government involvement in creating partnerships and designating responsibility.

The Jordanian government should designate a focal point – preferably inside the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation – to coordinate the nationwide response to Syrian refugees and to channel financial donations. The U.S. and EU should increase their humanitarian diplomacy with the Jordanian government to press for such a designation.

## CONCLUSION

While the political realities in both countries make it difficult for the refugee response to run smoothly or rapidly, those same realities require that all actors better address the refugee situation in order to pre-empt a humanitarian crisis and minimize internal and regional tensions. Lebanon and Jordan have the experience and expertise necessary for a comprehensive, effective response to the Syrian refugees crossing their borders. But their ability to carry it out will depend on both support from the international community, and a willingness domestically to make the well-being of refugees and local communities the highest priority.

*Daryl Grisgraber and RI President Michel Gabaudan traveled to Lebanon and Jordan in June 2012 to assess the situation of Syrian refugees.*