

Syria's Good Neighbors: How Jordan and Lebanon Sheltered Millions of Refugees

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Sep 28, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/jwar-swrya-almdyf-alardn-wlbnan-yawyan-mlayyn-allajyyn\)](/ar/policy-analysis/jwar-swrya-almdyf-alardn-wlbnan-yawyan-mlayyn-allajyyn)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

If the war and its resultant mass refugee flows continue, economic and social pressures could destabilize Jordan and Lebanon, steering more displaced Syrians toward Europe.

Since the start of the civil war in 2011, nearly four million Syrians have fled their country. Around half a million have sought political asylum in Europe; over the past eight months alone, more than 200,000 Syrians have reached the continent in what one British parliamentarian described as a "tsunami." To be sure, the number of refugees arriving in Europe is staggering, but it pales in comparison to the numbers who have settled in Jordan and Lebanon.

In the past four years, Jordan, with a pre-refugee population of eight million, and Lebanon, with a population of 4.5 million, have opened their borders to approximately a million and 1.5 million refugees, respectively. They did so despite the fact that Lebanon has a 120 percent debt-to-GDP ratio -- among the world's highest -- and that Jordan is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world.

Until now, these states have coped surprisingly well with the dramatic and sudden changes to their population. But there are signs that Lebanon and Jordan are about to reach their saturation point. Should the war in Syria and the refugee flows continue, economic and social pressures could destabilize these states.

STRUGGLING IN JORDAN

Jordan has a long and distinguished history of hosting refugees. An estimated 60 percent of the kingdom's citizens are of Palestinian origin -- refugees (and their descendants) from the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel. Although some institutional biases in employment and electoral politics persist, Palestinians have largely been integrated into

Jordanian society. Several hundred thousand Iraqis likewise reside in the country. The first wave arrived in 1991, followed by a large contingent after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But Jordan's one million new Syrian arrivals constitute a unique challenge. A small portion -- fewer than 120,000 -- live in the two available refugee camps. The larger of these camps, known as Zaatari, has gradually transformed into a permanent settlement and, with 80,000 residents, is now Jordan's fourth-largest city. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the refugees are dispersed throughout the state and are profoundly straining the Kingdom's perennially anemic economy, in which job creation is a significant problem.

Officially, unemployment is about 12 percent, a number much worse when one considers the low rate of workforce participation, which is 36 percent. Among young people, unemployment has reached 30 percent. Not surprisingly, the addition of hundreds of thousands of Syrians to the job market is increasing unemployment among Jordanians still further, as businesses replace locals, who must receive a minimum wage of \$268 per month, with cheaper Syrian labor. According to the International Labor Organization, in areas with high concentrations of Syrian refugees, unemployment among Jordanians has risen to 22 percent.

Syrian refugees have put pressure on Jordan's housing market, too. The demand for housing has pushed up rents. Earlier this year, a Jordanian taxi driver complained to me that his lease payment on his small apartment in the working-class neighborhood of East Amman had doubled to 200 Jordanian dinars (\$282) a month. The cost of food has also risen. And today, according to the World Bank, nearly a third of the Kingdom's citizens are, at some point during the year, impoverished. Consistent with these developments, a poll released in June conducted by the Amman-based Phenix Center for Economics and Informatics Studies indicated that 57 percent of Jordanians see the economy as "bad" or "very bad." It's even worse for the Syrians. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) reported this month that 86 percent of refugees living outside the camps fall below the poverty line.

Access to public resources, particularly primary education, is another concern. Before the war in Syria began, for example, the northern Jordanian town of Mafraq, located just ten miles from the Syrian border, had a population of 80,000. By 2014, it had swelled to 200,000. To deal with the influx, in Mafraq and elsewhere in Jordan, public schools now offer two different teaching sessions: Jordanian children receive their lessons in the morning and Syrian students in the afternoon.

Given the economic and social stresses, there have been surprisingly few incidents of violence reported thus far, even though they do still occur. Two years ago, in the tribal governorate of Tafilah, a Syrian attacked and killed a Jordanian man. In the assault's aftermath, Tafilah residents rioted and subsequently expelled seven hundred Syrian refugees from the town. More recently, in March, reports of a Jordanian woman slapping and insulting an "Arab" (i.e., Syrian) male who had verbally harassed her went viral.

BACKLASH IN LEBANON

In Lebanon, where Syrian refugees now constitute a quarter of the population, the current problems and future prospects are even worse. Lebanon, too, has a long history of accommodating refugees. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, 100,000 Palestinians fled to the country. Today, about 450,000 of these refugees and their descendants reside in 12 camps throughout the state because, unlike Jordan, Lebanon blocked Palestinian integration, fearing that the mostly Sunni refugees would skew the country's delicate sectarian balance of Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians. At that time, Lebanon issued draconian laws that, for more than 60 years, have prevented Palestinians from working and owning property. Today, Lebanon's Palestinians represent a permanent and increasingly frustrated and radicalized underclass.

The arrival of 1.5 million mostly Sunni Syrian refugees has led to similar discriminatory policies. According to Lebanese law, Syrians in Lebanon are required to obtain a \$200 six-month residency permit that excludes them

from work. Although many of the refugees do work illegally, their income, according to the International Labor Organization, is 40 percent less than the mandated \$448 per month Lebanese minimum wage. Meanwhile, unemployment among the Lebanese has doubled, reaching 24 percent total and 35 percent among youth. According to official government figures, poverty among Lebanese has also increased by two-thirds over the past four years.

Some 86 percent of Lebanon's Syrians live in poor villages, with little opportunity for employment or education. Nearly half reportedly live in unfinished buildings, empty stores, parking lots, and on the margins of agricultural fields -- including in predominantly Shiite areas like the Bekaa Valley. Beirut is now teeming with homeless Syrians. Young refugees are everywhere: begging and selling flowers, tissues, and packs of Chiclets on the streets. Beirut reports that petty crime is up by 60 percent and that 26 percent of Lebanon's prison population now consists of Syrian nationals, picked up for robbery, vagrancy, or working illegally. Now, months into the state's garbage crisis, in which political gridlock paralyzed the government and prevented it from performing basic services such as trash collection, the World Health Organization is warning that the unsanitary conditions could result in a cholera epidemic among the refugees.

Unlike in Jordan, the deluge of Syrians has triggered a strong backlash in Lebanon. Towns throughout Lebanon have introduced curfews on "foreign" residents. Human Rights Watch has reported rising violence against Syrian refugees, and other NGOs have noted an epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence against the community. This violence stems, in part, from the Lebanese fear that some of the refugees may be a part of Islamic State (also known as ISIS) " sleeper cells," poised to wreak havoc in Lebanon. The Lebanese press is replete with reports about these cells. Earlier this month, Lebanese Minister of Education Elias Bou Saab echoed these fears, suggesting that as many as two percent of the refugees might be "radicals" bent on perpetrating jihad in their new home.

At the same time, the refugee presence has exacerbated existing sectarian tensions. Since 2011, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah has been fighting in Syria to support the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which to date has killed nearly 300,000 mostly Sunni Muslims. Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has infuriated Sunnis, Lebanese, and Syrians alike, provoking a spate of 16 car bombings against sectarian targets a little more than a year ago.

On top of these micro-level changes, refugees are also taxing Lebanon's infrastructure -- particularly its electric, water, and education systems -- and depleting national finances. Both Jordan and Lebanon will run extensive budget deficits in 2015 as a result of refugee expenditures and other Syria-related revenue losses, such as in trade and tourism. Even if Jordan receives all of its anticipated international refugee assistance -- which is far from certain since donor funds have been steadily dwindling -- the state will overspend by \$660 million, or by five percent of its \$11.4 billion budget. Lebanon's projected 33 percent deficit of \$5.1 billion is even starker, especially given the current national debt crisis.

DONOR FATIGUE

To a large extent, budget deficits in Jordan and Lebanon are the result of insufficient international financial assistance. Last year, the United Nations appealed for \$4.5 billion in donations to provide critical food and other aid to vulnerable Syrian refugees throughout the region. To date, however, the UN has met only 37 percent of this goal, and the largest funding gaps, according to UNHCR, remain in Lebanon and Jordan. For example, Jordan has received just \$466 million of the \$1.19 billion that the UN determined Amman needs to accommodate the refugees, and Lebanon has collected just \$649 million of \$1.97 billion.

The funding shortfall has had serious repercussions for the refugees. This summer, World Food Program (WFP) subsidies to needy refugees in the region were slashed. In some cases, assistance was reduced by half, to just \$14 per month; in other cases, the stipend was cut entirely. Earlier this month, the WFP notified over 200,000 refugees in Jordan via text message that their food aid would be zeroed out. Donor fatigue and the surge of Syrian refugees to

European shores will likely accentuate the downward trend in funding.

Given the dire financial situation of the refugees and the inadequacy of foreign assistance, it comes as little surprise that Jordan and Lebanon have taken steps to curtail the influx. In recent months, Jordan has limited the flow of Syrians to a trickle, and it is now floating the idea of sectioning off a part of southern Syria and creating a humanitarian and military safe zone. Meanwhile, Beirut has raised the bureaucratic bar for residency so high that Syrians are reportedly now fleeing for more hospitable destinations. In some cases, middle-class Syrian refugees are risking their lives to reach Europe, and leaving sanctuary in Jordan and Lebanon to do so. The choice suggests that these states offer little opportunity and poor quality of life to Syrians.

ROOTS AND NO RETURN

The sad reality is that many if not most of these refugees will never return to Syria. Given the level of destruction -- nearly half of all Syrian housing has been demolished -- there would be little to return to. Even if Assad is eventually vanquished, the war will most likely continue as a new battle between the various Sunni militias.

Although UNHCR and other international organizations don't readily admit it, according to the Oxford Centre for Refugee Studies, "when displacement has been prolonged, many refugees have become established in their new place of settlement and their desire or willingness to return may diminish." In short, refugees who spend a decade or more outside their countries of origin seldom repatriate. The longer the fighting continues, the more likely these refugees will put down roots, never to return.

In the months ahead, Syrians who have the wherewithal will continue to seek European shores hoping to reestablish a middle-class existence. Europe may eventually manage this influx, absorb the refugees, and even benefit from the younger population. Yet for those who can't afford the perilous journey, Jordan and Lebanon will remain the destination of last resort. These states have demonstrated aptitude for muddling through adversity, but the economic and social pressures on Jordan and Lebanon may soon prove too much for even these resilient states.

David Schenker is the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the [Foreign Affairs website](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/jordan/2015-09-28/syrias-good-neighbors)

(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/jordan/2015-09-28/syrias-good-neighbors>). ❖

Foreign Affairs

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



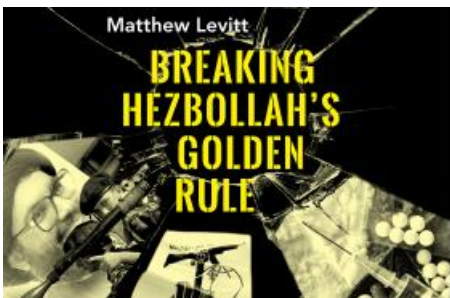
BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Jordan \(/policy-analysis/jordan\)](#)

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)