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SYRIAN REFUGEES IN JORDAN: THINGS GET WORSE

Over 600,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan face increasingly difficult circumstances as the conflict in their home country wears on with no end in sight. While the large camps of Za'atari and Azraq are regularly held up as examples of the ever-improving refugee response in Jordan, the situation for Syrians outside those camps is considerably less positive. Jordan remains one of the primary countries of concern in the Syrian refugee crisis because of the large numbers of refugees it hosts, and because its long-term ability to host those refugees is in question. Without substantive assistance from the international community, Jordan may not be able to continue supporting vulnerable people fleeing Syria.



Syrian refugees at Za'atari Camp in Jordan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ International donors should support development of Jordan's national systems and infrastructure to help them provide services to the hundreds of thousands of refugees now living in the country.
- ❑ International and private donors should shore up the budget of the World Food Program immediately in order to reverse cuts to refugees' rations, including in Jordan.
- ❑ Aid agencies should put an increased emphasis on creating livelihoods programming for Jordanians and for Syrian refugees, with the end goal of increasing self-sufficiency among both populations.
- ❑ The Jordan government should endeavor to keep its borders open for Syrian refugees escaping the conflict in that country.

BACKGROUND

Though significant improvements – particularly in camps – in support to Syrian refugees in Jordan have come about in the course of the crisis, much remains to be done for the large non-camp population spread across the country. What began as a difficult housing and employment environment has evolved into a wider set of challenges in all areas of life. Over the course of four years, rents increased, food became more expensive, working illegally could lead to detention, and people's savings ran out. More recently, Jordan deemed Syrian refugees ineligible for care in the national health system; the World Food Program (WFP) significantly reduced its monthly rations; the inability to make a living pushed more and more children out of school and into the workplace; and lack of options – especially for earning money – compelled people to move on to Europe or to return to Syria.

ALMOST FIVE YEARS ON

After almost five years away from home, it is clear that Syrian refugees will not be able to return to Syria any time soon. Consequently, support in host countries must expand from immediate lifesaving aid like food and shelter to longer term assistance like improvements in Jordan's national services and infrastructure, improvements that will benefit host communities and refugees alike. Donors and aid agencies identified this challenge several years ago, but there is not yet a concrete plan on how to integrate the two and fund them both adequately. The past two years' versions of the 3RP (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan) have been an important step forward in this area, but much remains to be done. International donors should support development of Jordan's national systems – including health and education – and infrastructure to help them provide services to the hundreds of thousands of refugees now living in the country, even while continuing the emergency assistance that helps so many people survive.

One of the most dramatic examples of the lessening support for Syrian refugees in Jordan is this summer's cut in WFP rations. Where people previously received approximately 26 U.S. dollars per person per month, funding shortages forced the agency to decrease its assistance worldwide: in Jordan, the monthly disbursement was reduced to 13 U.S. dollars per person per month. Food support is one of the basic elements of survival for refugees, and loss of that support in Jordan leaves Syrian refugees looking for other options – sometimes quite dangerous – to get by. International and private donors should shore up the budget of the World Food Program immediately in order to reverse cuts to refugees' rations, including in Jordan.

Another aspect of Syrian refugees' challenges is making a living. Syrian refugees are generally not allowed to work legally in Jordan, and the penalty for illegal employment can be as severe as detention that may lead to deportation. Absent lawful ways of providing for their families, Syrians will continue to work in the informal economy, where they are often exploited and mistreated, and where children are being put to work when adults cannot earn money. And with a relatively high unemployment rate in Jordan already, there has been reluctance to offer regular work options to refugees. Aid agencies should put an increased emphasis on creating livelihoods programming for Jordanians and for Syrian refugees, with the end goal of increasing self-sufficiency among both populations.

Even an ideal humanitarian response to refugees is not meaningful unless the vulnerable have access to safe space where assistance is being offered. While the Jordanian border is in principle open to Syrian refugees, in the past months many fewer people have succeeded in crossing. Injured people and vulnerable women and children are still entering, but are now subject to security assessments. While Jordan has the right to manage its own borders as it sees fit, people seeking protection must be allowed to cross the border into safe space. In conjunction with the international community, the Jordanian government should endeavor to keep its borders open for Syrian refugees escaping the conflict in that country.

Daryl Grisgraber traveled to Jordan in August 2015.