



Syrian “Guests” in Jordan:

Family Ties, Strained Relations, and Recommendations for Mutual Development

A Policy Project of the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies
by Denis J. Sullivan & Charles Simpson



Background & Introduction

Since spring 2012—three years before Syrian refugees started making headlines in Europe—Jordan has been at the forefront of the humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict.

What began as emergency response, crisis management, and provision of life-saving aid to thousands of Syrian families who crossed the Jordanian border has evolved into a potentially insurmountable development challenge.

The Government of Jordan, with support from various “friends” (Arab, European, American, United Nations, and other), has struggled to provide Syrian “guests” (both UNHCR-registered refugees and others) with housing, food, education, healthcare, and now jobs.

Jordan is home to 655,000 Syrians registered as refugees and another 600,000 or more unregistered, who were either living in Jordan before the refugee crisis began in 2012 or otherwise have been making a home there outside of the UNHCR system.

They are living in Jordan’s cities, villages, rural areas, or in UNHCR-operated refugee camps (chief among them, the Za’atari refugee camp). Whether refugees or not, the vast majority are unable to return to Syria due to the protracted proxy war (masked as a civil war) and the related barriers to return: families scattered across the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere; complete loss of property and community; fears of political retribution; and other impediments.

BCARS faculty and students have been involved in research and policy in Jordan since the refugee crisis began,

focusing initially on Jordan’s refugee camps, most notably the 80,000-resident Za’atari camp near the Syrian border.

By 2014, as the Syrian conflict showed no signs of abatement and the protracted nature of refugee situation became clear, BCARS faculty refocused attention from camps to non-camp urban refugees and the long-term development challenges associated with these populations, including livelihoods, education, housing, infrastructure, and human security.

BCARS has hosted numerous workshops on the Syrian refugee crisis, including two in Boston (October 2014 and April 2015) and several in Amman (May 2015, March 2016, May 2016, and January 2017). These workshops have included policy experts, Jordanian government workers, security professionals, international and local aid workers, and the hosts and refugees themselves. This policy paper draws upon five years of experience examining Jordan’s Syrian refugee challenge and presents recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

Part One introduces a summary of those recommendations: three aimed at the local level plus another three for national policymakers and three more aimed at regional interventions.

Part Two gives an overview of BCARS’s data sources, and offers a snapshot of Jordan in the broader Syrian refugee context. **Part Three** gives a more thorough overview of BCARS’s recommendations for practitioners and policymakers at the local, national, and regional levels.

Part One: Summary of Policy Recommendations

LOCAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Conduct regular information outreach campaigns** to inform refugees about changing policies and services and to build relationships between and among aid personnel, Jordanian hosts, and refugee leaders.

Despite social media outreach and other attempts to “get the word out”, rumors abound among refugee populations, especially pertaining to registration requirements, labor laws, and freedom of movement; in person communication is necessary to keep refugees accurately and thoroughly informed.

Furthermore, outreach should be valued not just for passing on relevant information, but also for building relationships between aid organizations, host populations, and refugee communities. To reiterate, outreach and communications is already happening—we simply see the need for much more of this as the complexities are ever-evolving.

- 2. Address inter-communal tensions between Jordanians and Syrians** through engagement programs, community development, educational campaigns, and aid provision to refugees and low- to middle-income Jordanians. Both groups must begin to appreciate the protracted nature of the Syrian refugee situation in Jordan and appreciate its opportunities, not just its burdens.
- 3. Consult local experts when developing aid programming:** Aid projects have too often been copied and pasted from low-income countries and cannot just be grafted on to Jordan’s middle-income context or its local needs.

Aid organizations should engage more deeply with local experts on Jordan’s socioeconomic conditions in order to tailor aid programming for the country’s specific local conditions.

This might seem an obvious statement, but we find that local experts are regularly overlooked, with international specialists getting higher access and priority.

NATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Continue refining and promoting the April 2016 London Compact work permit initiative**, which recognizes the protracted stay of Syrian refugees and moves them toward sustainable, legal employment and away from social welfare. Humanitarian and development assistance must be understood as interconnected when dealing with protracted conflicts like the Syrian war.
- 2. Invest aid money in urban infrastructure projects**, particularly housing, transportation, and water infrastructure development in urban settings that reach both Syrian refugees and low- to middle-income Jordanians.
- 3. Engage with civil society to meet the scale of the refugee crisis.** Professional aid practitioners alone cannot meet the scale of the refugee crisis in Jordan (which also holds true for Lebanon and Turkey and elsewhere), and there is a large body of civil society actors—including Syrians—who are eager to participate in providing goods and services. These community leaders, faith-based organizations, and local NGOs should be encouraged and empowered.

Part One: Summary of Policy Recommendations

REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Increase coordination with academics and think tanks** to evaluate policy, share lessons, and build institutional memory between practitioners in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

Practitioners often reinvent the wheel or work on lessons learned from “last year’s crisis” rather than learning from one another and from the new realities of the current crisis. Given that large-scale forced migration in the region will persist, institutional memory and sharing of lessons will be continue to be essential.

- 2. Allow more free flow of refugees through regional borders** for family reunification and to prevent risky movement from southern Syria to reach the porous Turkish border to the north, a risk imposed by closed Jordanian and Lebanese borders.

- 3. Make preventing a “lost generation” of Syrian youth a priority.** A combination of psychosocial treatment and education—including informal, non-formal, and trade schools—can help empower a generation of young Syrians whose educations and upbringing are being disrupted by conflict.



Part Two: BCARS's Work in Jordan

BCARS faculty initially began researching and developing policy recommendations for the Syrian refugee crisis by examining Jordan's Za'atari refugee camp. Since 2012, this camp has been—for hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees—the first source of stability after crossing the Jordanian border.

During 2013 and 2014, BCARS researchers examined Za'atari's political structure and informal governance mechanisms; its securitization, communications, and digital information systems; and women's rights issues. As the camp expanded and became semi-permanent, researchers began examining camp infrastructure and resource sustainability.

By 2014, the refugee crisis had expanded well beyond the Mafraq border region and beyond Jordan's camps; BCARS faculty refocused attention to non-camp refugees, examining rural agricultural migrant labor dynamics; urban livelihoods challenges and Jordan's work permit initiative; formal, informal and non-formal education schemes; housing and infrastructure challenges; and emerging human security concerns from Syrian-Jordanian inter-communal tensions.

BCARS has worked to understand the refugee crisis using a combination of top-down and bottom-up data.

High-level understanding of governance and policy thinking has been developed through workshops and meetings with refugee experts in Amman, Boston, Istanbul, Beirut, Geneva, Belgrade, Thessaloniki, New York City, and Washington, D.C., while interviews and site visits to camps, refugee-employing farms, and refugee-dense urban neighborhoods across Jordan have provided insights to the perspective of the everyday challenges and successes, for refugees and Jordanians, in handling Syrian migration and resettlement.¹

JORDAN AS A REFUGEE HOST

Jordan's history with refugees dates to long before the influx of Syrians in 2012: The Kingdom has been host to Palestinian refugees since 1947, a population that now numbers around 2 million. Jordan has also hosted hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees fleeing conflict, first from the 1991 Gulf War and then again after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

This long history with refugees is both a benefit and a challenge: it has provided institutional memory for the Jordanian government and aid agencies for best practices in refugee management, but it also offers challenges, due to a history of conflict between refugees and hosts and factionalized national demographics.

¹ For more information on these topics, please visit the [BCARS website publications page](#), or contact BCARS faculty.

Part Two: BCARS's Work in Jordan

Jordan's other challenges in hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees include economic and resource stress. Since the Syrian refugee crisis began, Jordan has experienced relatively slow job growth and increased vulnerability to global financial downturns.

Widespread infrastructure limitations have been further stressed, including insufficient middle- to low-income housing, inefficient water distribution mechanisms, and rising energy demands. Jordan is the second water-poorest country in the world, a condition that is exacerbated by and catalyzes the challenges of hosting large influxes of people.

In Mafraq city, for example, water that was once available 24/7 is now only available by truck delivery once per week. Finally, Jordan faces regional insecurity from a shared border with Syria and Iraq and its proximity to Egypt's Sinai; these security concerns are escalated by internal security concerns of hosting a new, large refugee population, raising the specter of the 1970 "Black September" uprisings of Palestinian refugees.

RESPONSES TO REFUGEES

Jordan's initial response to the refugee crisis was to establish expansive camps with the support of international aid organizations, primarily UNHCR, other large agencies (including ICRC, IRC, MSF), and state-funded aid from USAID and Gulf countries among others.

However, by 2014 it was clear that Jordan's sprawling camps in the desert of Mafraq province—most prominently the Za'atari camp, which peaked at 202,000 residents ([April 2013](#))—were inadequate to meet refugees' expectations for well-being as the Syrian conflict dragged on.

While basic short-term needs were met in Jordan's camps—including food, water, and shelter—after years of living in these conditions, a large proportion of refugees began asking for a higher standard of living, requesting jobs, permanent shelters, education, and community participation.

To meet these needs, refugees often turned to the informal economy, informal governance from Syrian strongmen ("*Abus*," as they came to be known in Za'atari), and informal housing outside of the camps. Today, only around 20 percent of Syrian refugees in Jordan live in camps, with the rest forming dense economic and social support networks in Amman, Zarqa, Irbid, Mafraq, and rural agricultural *badia* regions.

Although the Government of Jordan and aid agencies recognize that the protracted Syrian war will require development strategies to meet Jordan's humanitarian challenges by introducing work permit programs, informal education opportunities, and hosting Jordanian-Syrian community development projects, these initiatives are in their infancy.

Part Two: BCARS’s Work in Jordan

Durable solutions for the challenges will require governments and aid organizations to merge development and humanitarian strategies, including a widespread attitudinal shift from seeing Syrian refugees as **temporary burdens to be managed** toward the perception of Syrian refugees as **long-term assets to be empowered**.

JORDAN IN THE TRANSNATIONAL SYRIAN REFUGEE CONTEXT

By the summer of 2015, Syrian refugees began moving by the hundreds of thousands into Europe, and the “crisis” finally began filling international headlines.

But while the “European migration crisis” grabbed international attention, the scale of responsibility for supporting Syrian refugees was still overwhelmingly weighted toward Syria’s border countries: Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Germany, the primary European host for Syrian refugees, has taken in almost a half a million Syrians, but this is only a drop in the bucket compared with Jordan’s 1.26 million, Lebanon’s 1 million, and Turkey’s 2.8 million.

Germany’s half-million Syrian refugees amount to about half of a percent of its total population, whereas national demographics in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are now 13 percent, 23 percent, and 3.6 percent Syrian, respectively.

While Europe deserves credit for accepting Syrian refugees, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey remain at the forefront of the humanitarian response. Europe’s “migrant crisis” must be understood as a small challenge next to the demands faced by these Syrian border states.

Some Syrians living in Jordan have been documented leaving Jordan and moving along the Balkans route to Europe, but they are a minority of mostly young men seeking better educational and economic opportunities; most Syrians have chosen to stay in Jordan due to linguistic and cultural familiarity and persistent dreams of crossing the nearby border back to Syria.

	EU	US	Germany	Jordan	Lebanon	Turkey
Syrian Refugees	1,322,825	16,218	476,510	1,265,000	1,017,433	2,764,500
Total Population	508,000,000	318,900,000	80,620,000	9,523,000	4,467,000	74,930,000
% of Total Population	0.26%	0.005%	0.59%	13.3%	22.8%	3.6% ²

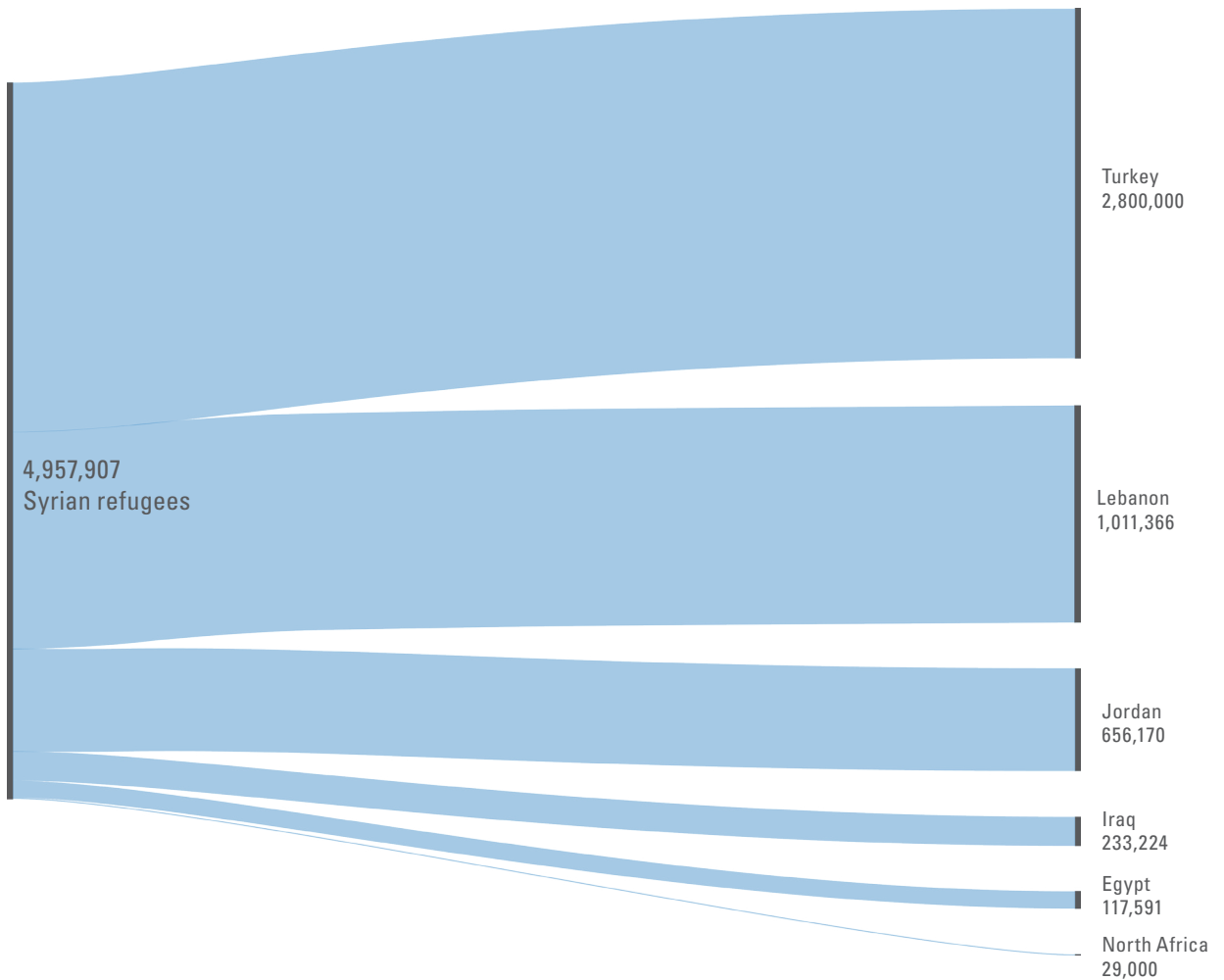
² These figures are approximations based on UNHCR, Eurostat, and national census data. With any hidden and mobile population, especially politically controversial groups like refugees, estimations are necessary based on the best available data.

Syria's Refugee Waves

The following graphs illustrate the numbers, collected from the UNHCR by the end of 2016, of refugees that leave Syria to its neighboring countries first, then a fraction head to different European nations seeking asylum. The width of the lines are an accurate representation of the refugee distribution.

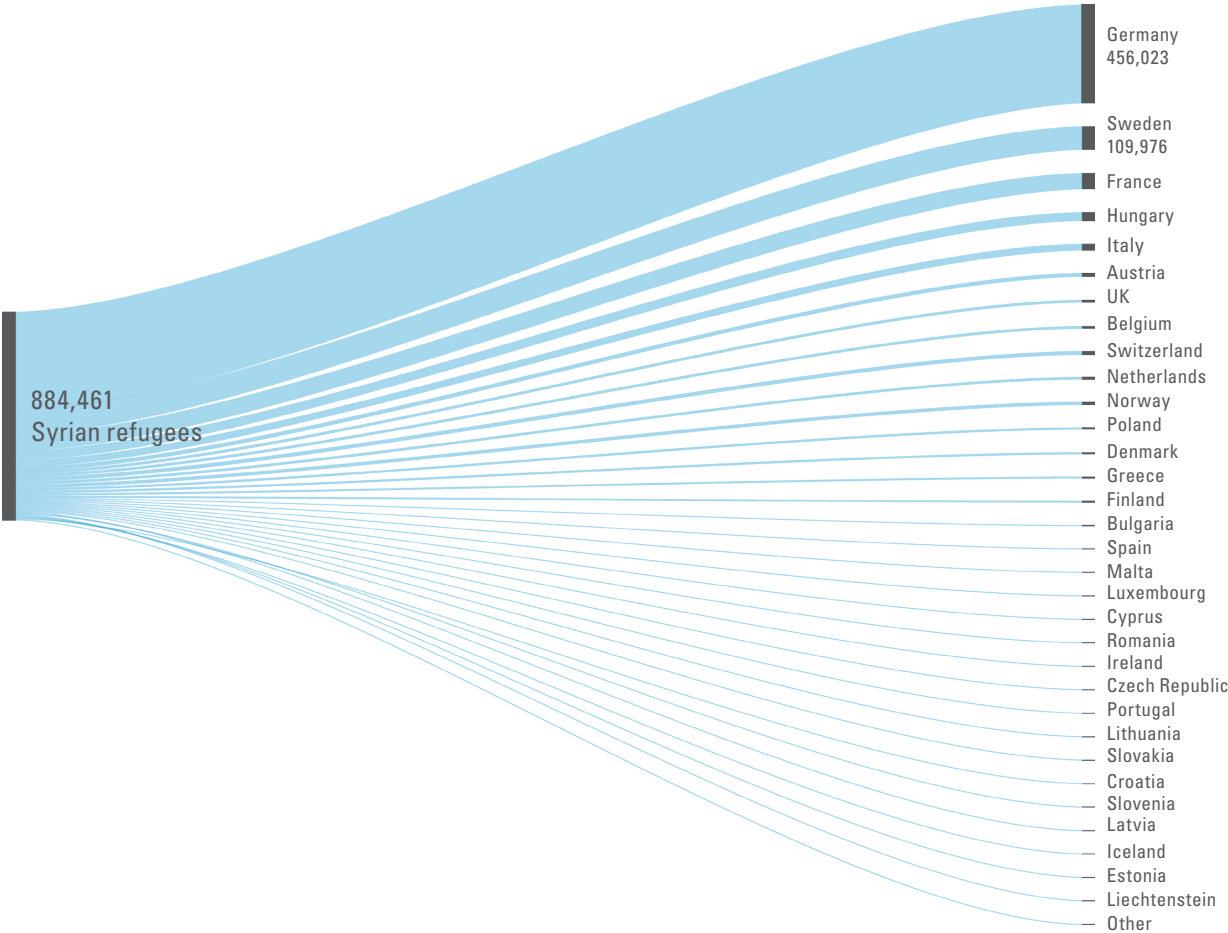
Syrian Refugees in Neighboring Countries

Data Visualization by Maaria Assami,
Boston Consortium *for* Arab Region Studies



Syrian Refugees Continuing to Europe

Data Visualization by Maaria Assami,
Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies



Part Three: Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

Given Jordan's legacy with refugees and BCARS' extensive experience with refugee issues in the country, we offer the following policy recommendations for practitioners and policymakers working in Jordan's Syrian refugee sphere.

LOCAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Conduct regular information outreach campaigns** focusing on refugee labor rights, registration requirements, and regulations on freedom of movement, among other constantly changing policies.

Despite social media outreach, rumors abound among refugee populations, particularly about who can work in which jobs, the benefits of being formally registered or issued a work permit, how to move within and outside of Jordan, opportunities for family reunification, and availability of services.

Digital outreach strategies using social media, texting, and web platforms have proven successful in their breadth of exposure in both camp and non-camp settings; however, refugees often do not understand or trust digital information sources, or the information provided is irrelevant. Because of these limitations, *in-person* communications efforts are necessary to keep refugees accurately and fully informed.

Town hall meetings, community center events, networking between aid organization leaders and refugee community leaders, and faith-based programs relying on mosques to deliver information have proven effective at dispelling rumors and disseminating timely and valued information in camp and non-camp settings.

Practitioners should devote greater attention to in-person outreach campaigns for building relationships and trust between aid organization personnel, government institution representatives, and refugees.

Refugees often perceive formal institutions as faceless, unhelpful, or even malicious, especially among the majority of refugees who have fled government oppression in Syria. In-person outreach campaigns humanize aid organizations and government ministries, increase trust between institutions and refugees, reduce hostility toward a host government widely perceived as unsupportive, and empower refugees as self-advocates.

In camp settings, Za'atari's community policing program showcases the value of in-person information outreach efforts, as does UNHCR's Livelihoods Town Hall Meetings in non-camp settings.

- 2. Address inter-communal tensions between Jordanians and Syrians** through engagement programs, community development, educational campaigns, and aid provision to refugees and needy Jordanians.

Jordan's already tenuous employment situation, limited low- to middle-income housing, overburdened infrastructure, and stressed resources have all been exacerbated since the 2012 influx of Syrian refugees; a significant portion of the Jordanian public perceives that the Syrian migrant population is wholly to blame for these stresses.

Although Syrians are generally treated with hospitality by their Jordanian hosts, there are significant and increas-

Part Three: Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

ing inter-communal clashes along Syrian-Jordanian lines, particularly between children in schools and in border towns, where jobs, housing, and other resources are perceived to have been wrongly allocated to Syrians rather than Jordanians.

The most prescient policy intervention would be for donors to ensure that their mandates include distribution of goods and services not only to refugees, but also to low- and middle-income Jordanians, accompanied by information outreach communicating that *both* populations are receiving aid.

The Jordanian public should receive additional information to diffuse hostility, such as showcasing studies that prove that Syrian refugees are not taking jobs from Jordanians, and in fact compete with other migrant workers for positions—contributing to, not detracting from, the Jordanian economy.

Community engagement programs to build relationships between Jordanians and Syrians—for example, youth football leagues and teacher training—have also proven successful in reducing tensions.

- 3. Consider local particularities of programming:** Too many programs have been copied from low-income contexts and pasted onto Jordan's middle-income context. For example, a 1.5 million euro project from Sub-Saharan Africa was applied to teach Syrians bathroom hygiene, completely missing the health needs of the target population.

Similarly, work permit projects have aimed at informal income generation, as was the goal in Somalia, rather than

job formalization, as is the principle challenge in Jordan. Even inside Jordan, the needs of camp and non-camp settings—and those of one neighborhood versus another—may be vastly different; programming must reflect these particularities.

In short, *before* launching programming, aid practitioners should invest time and energy to engage more deeply with local experts to familiarize themselves with Jordan's unique economic, cultural, and political demands, and then develop programming that reflects these unique needs.

Failing to do so risks wasting resources that are already stretched and causing more harm than good to refugee and host communities.

NATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Continue refining and promoting the February 2016 Jordan Compact work permit initiative** that recognizes the protracted stay of Syrian refugees and aims to move them into sustainable, legal employment conditions, rather than holding them as indefinite recipients of social welfare.

Humanitarian emergency relief and long-term development assistance must be understood as intertwined when dealing with protracted conflicts such as the Syrian civil war. Humanitarian and development agencies will need increased coordination to address overlapping responsibilities in supporting populations displaced by prolonged conflict.

Part Three: Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

Syrian refugees are eager to work and contribute to their families and the Jordanian economy. The Jordan Compact has begun to empower them to this end, but it is only a first step.

Moving more Syrian refugees into jobs within the formal economy will require expanded efforts to offer financial incentives for formalization, broadening of authorized sectors for refugee employment, expanding employment of women, and job creation programs, such as national infrastructure projects.

2. Invest aid money in urban infrastructure projects, particularly housing, transportation, and water projects that reach both Syrian refugees and low- to middle-income Jordanians. Infrastructure projects have multiple positive features.

First, Jordan's deficit of low- and middle-income housing and its status as the world's second water-poorest country mean that it is in desperate need of more efficient and expanded water and housing infrastructure.

Second, infrastructure improvements benefit Jordanians and Syrians, relieving pressures on the host community and de-escalating hostilities from Jordanian perceptions about the allocation of resources.

Finally, infrastructure projects are labor-intensive and can create jobs for Jordanians and Syrians alike, allowing both to move off of social welfare and into sustainable employment.

3. Engage with civil society to meet the scale of the refugee crisis. Aid practitioners alone cannot meet the scale of the crisis in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. However, there is a large body of civil society actors—including Syrians themselves—who are eager to participate in providing goods and services to refugees.

These include faith-based organizations, community leaders, and local NGOs. Practitioners and governments should meet regularly with representatives from civil society while conducting “asset mapping” to identify service gaps and the organizations and individuals that can fill these gaps.

Civil society actors have the advantage of scale and local knowledge that enables the specific delivery of aid based on populations' unique circumstances and needs.

Civil society organizations and individuals from the Syrian refugee and diaspora population should be understood as assets to be empowered rather than simply burdens to be acted on, as BCARS and our workshop participants recommended in our January 2015 policy report, [“Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis: A Call for Regional and International Responses.”](#)

Part Three: Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

REGIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- 1. Increase coordination with academics and think tanks** to evaluate policy, share lessons, and build institutional memory between practitioners and policymakers in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Lessons learned and best practices have emerged in each country, but in a crisis environment there has been little time or energy invested in capturing and sharing these insights.

Each country does not need to reinvent the wheel for each aid and development challenge it faces, and unlike aid programming from low-income cases, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey all have similar middle-income status, allowing them to share experiences effectively.

The current Syrian refugee challenge will not be the last forced migration in the region; rather, the UN projects that mass movements of people fleeing conflict and natural disasters will expand in scale and frequency throughout the twenty-first century.

Experiences from the current refugee situation should be institutionalized and recorded to allow future practitioners and policymakers to avoid repeating the mistakes of today. Regional conferences, workshops, and other collaborative efforts have already proven effective at sharing and institutionalizing lessons learned and best practices across multiple refugee sites and host countries. These projects should be continued and expanded.

- 2. Allow freer flow of refugees through regional borders** for family reunification and prevention of risky movements through Syria to reach the open Turkish

border. BCARS faculty interviewed numerous Syrian refugees who had been forced to travel with their families from southern Syria to the porous Turkish border due to closed Jordanian and Lebanese borders, often crossing through ISIS-controlled territory, Assad-regime security strongholds, or other conflicted areas at extraordinary risk.

Despite the risk, they have weighted their chances of being fired upon by Jordanian border patrols or held for months by the Jordanian army in desert tent settlements along the border as less risky than traveling through Syria to reach Turkey.

More open border policies and expedited screening would prevent refugees from being forced to weigh these avoidable risks.

Border restrictions and convoluted residency rules have prevented refugee families dispersed across the Arab world—often as close as a few hundred kilometers away in Jordan and Lebanon—from being able to reunify or visit each other.

As the conflict in Syria draws on, these restrictions have placed heavy social, emotional, and financial tolls on refugee families.

Closed borders were intended to increase the security of Jordan and Lebanon; in fact, the main result is that they have prohibitively increased the cost of human smuggling above rates that average Syrian families can pay, while increasing hostility and resentment toward Jordan and Lebanon from Syrian refugee communities.

Part Three: Policy Proposals for Local, National, and Regional Interventions

For these reasons, border policies that emphasize human security over territorial security, temporary passports, and clearer, more flexible residency policies for refugees that allow more fluid movement across borders should be pursued.

- 3. Make preventing a “lost generation” of Syrian youth a priority.** A combination of psychosocial treatment and education—including informal, non-formal, and trade schools—can empower a generation of young Syrians whose education and upbringing have been disrupted by conflict.

Syrian youth have the potential to empower displaced refugee communities, contribute to host-country economies, and eventually rebuild Syria, but doing so will require investment in Syrian youth education and psychosocial well-being from the international community.

Many positive examples are already evident: teenage Syrians providing non-formal education to their younger peers in Za’atari camp with Questscope Interna-

tional; Syrian youths acting as mentors through football and other ad hoc sports leagues in Amman; Syrian artists providing Arabic theater training to young displaced Arabs and local Turks at Pages Café in Istanbul; and college-educated Syrians creating a cultural awareness and employment training program with the Syrian Researchers network across Germany.

These young people have made the difficult choice to reject violence—either with the Syrian national army or with opposition groups—and instead embrace a peaceful but displaced life. They should be empowered by refugee host governments and encouraged by civil society through funding, networking opportunities, and public recognition.



Conclusions

The Syrian refugee challenge in Jordan has reached its fifth year and will persist along with the Syrian conflict. Even if war ceased today, fears of political retribution and lack of opportunities in Syria will keep a vast number of refugees in Jordan for the foreseeable future.

Jordan and the numerous aid organizations operating there should be commended for their remarkable hospitality to Syrian refugees and their rapid, wide-scale provision of life-preserving aid to more than 1 million Syrians.

However, the challenges of hosting refugees for a protracted period remain, most notably in developing livelihood opportunities, improving information outreach, educating youth, launching infrastructure projects, balancing border security and humanitarianism, and mitigating inter-communal tensions.

BCARS offers the above policy recommendations to aid practitioners and policymakers in meeting these challenges, and will continue developing understanding of the refugee situation in Jordan and beyond.

We encourage policymakers, practitioners, and academics to reference these recommendations and tailor them for their unique circumstances. BCARS faculty members are available to discuss these and other ideas. We thank our partners and the numerous refugees who have provided valuable contributions to our research.



SYRIAN “GUESTS” IN JORDAN: FAMILY TIES, STRAINED RELATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MUTUAL DEVELOPMENT



BCARS is grateful to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for its continuing support of our research and policy programs, and to the many practitioners, advisors, and refugees who have provided guidance and expertise on the challenges faced by Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities.

This document is the result of a prolonged and collaborative fact-finding and interview process. All refugees interviewed were provided anonymity when speaking. Experts were asked to provide their names, titles, and institutional affiliations.

At policy workshops, BCARS followed Chatham House rules, meaning neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other source, is specified in relation to a particular statement or set of views. References of expert sources who were interviewed for this paper are available on request. Every effort has been made to provide a clear and accurate overview of the sources' views and comments.

Principal authors

Denis J. Sullivan and Charles Simpson

Sharing is encouraged, but please give credit and let us know:
www.bcars-global.org

Photos provided by

BCARS staff and volunteers