

RETHINKING THE RESPONSE TO REFUGEES IN JORDAN: *Local Based Assistance, Urban Refugees and Host Communities*



USCRI POLICY PAPER • JORDAN

November 2012

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) visited Jordan in July and November of 2012, to meet with refugees, government officials, and international and local organizations. The violence in Syria has created a massive and complex humanitarian crisis with more than half a million people fleeing to neighboring countries. The current situation is expected to continue and worsen, with more than 710,000 refugees expected by the end of the year throughout the region¹. The UN and partner agencies, for a second time this year, updated the Refugee Response Plan in September, including an appeal of \$488

¹Revised Syrian Regional Response Plan, September 2012, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/uploads/SyriaRRP.pdf>

²UNHCR data web portal – <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

million for the response in four countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan) through the end of the year.

As of November 12 a total of 118,398 Syrian refugees were registered, waiting for registration or receiving assistance in Jordan². It is believed that many more refugees have sought safety in Jordan but have not yet registered or sought assistance. In addition, a small number of Palestinian refugees from Syria have sought safety in Jordan. The government estimates that over 200,000 refugees are currently in the country. While the displacement of Syrian refugees unfolds, tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees remain in Jordan and have become one of the recent protracted refugee situations. With no clear end in sight, the international community must rethink its response

to ensure sustainability, address current protection gaps, uphold refugee rights, and better support host communities. In Jordan there have been positive policies that need to be sustained, but changes are needed to move away from practices that restrict refugee rights.

USCRI'S Findings and Recommendations:

Keeping an Open Border Policy

- We commend the open borders policy instituted by Jordan and other countries in the region for Syrian refugees fleeing the violence in Syria. It is important to continue this policy given the ongoing conflict inside Syria and the reports of human rights abuses. With the deterioration of the situation in Syria, additional support will be needed for the Jordanian Government and other governments in the region to continue to provide protection to those fleeing violence in Syria. The same policy should also apply to other populations fleeing the violence in Syria - reports of *refoulement* and restrictions for Palestinians and Iraqi refugees are troubling.

Freedom of Movement: Moving away from a camp-based model

- Until July of this year, refugees arriving in Jordan were placed in transit facilities, most of which were pre-existing buildings and structures. Refugees had access to a bailout system, in which Jordanians were able to post a small bond for the release of refugees from the facilities. In July, a refugee camp, Za'atri, was established in a desert area not far from the Syrian border. At present, all refugees crossing the border are transported to Za'atri. Currently, over 30,000 refugees are living in Za'atri camp, most of them in tents. The harsh living conditions in the camp, its isolation and the lack of freedom of movement have generated frustration and protests from refugees. While the bailout system has been resumed for some refugees, many others are leaving the camp spontaneously without assistance and some are returning to Syria. It is also disconcerting that documentation is taken away from refugees after their arrival at the camp; subsequently many of them leave the camp without their documents. Given its poor condition, the expected capacity of the Za'atri



Tents line the landscape of Za'atri refugee camp in Jordan. USCRI/November 2012

camp has been reduced and another camp is under construction. There are lessons to be learned from this response, and there is still time to move away from encampment and restriction of movement.

The expansion of transit facilities and sites could provide better living conditions, access to local services and greater dignity to refugees seeking protection. Transit facilities should be reception sites where refugees are assisted, connected to services, and which offer freedom of movement. The bail-out system should be resumed for all populations, broadened and better monitored to avoid abuse of vulnerable populations. Moving away from encampment could help to refocus resources to ensure a more effective response in urban areas and assist host communities. The international community must move away from policies and practices that could lead to the warehousing of refugees, resulting in long-term and protracted situations with limited solutions.

Refugees in Urban Areas: Assistance based on Local NGOs, the Host Government and Communities

- Currently, two-thirds of refugees from Syria in Jordan are living in host communities, mostly in urban or semi-urban areas. The international community should provide support to the government of Jordan and local NGOs to respond to the high influx of refugees by providing financial assistance. Additionally, technical assistance and support from international organizations is crucial to ensure effective assistance delivery. The response to the Iraqi displacement should serve as a model to build upon. Local organizations should play a key role in providing assistance and bridging gaps with the local communities. Coupled with adequate support for host communities, this will ensure a sustainable and welcoming environment while addressing the needs of refugees and

host communities. This support should also provide a commitment to ensure protection and access to refugee rights.

This response—based on the Jordanian government, local NGOs and support from the international community—should focus on:

- **Investing in local capacity and infrastructure:** The government of Jordan allows registered refugees in urban areas to access health and education systems. It is important to support these policies by investing in local infrastructure and local capacity to respond to the needs of refugees while simultaneously benefiting local communities.
- **Examples** of great practices that should be expanded include the training and hiring of teachers, the improvement or expansion of school facilities and hospitals, and the enhancement of the capacity of local NGOs that provide health and psychosocial services.
- **Increasing support to host communities:** Many refugees are staying with families and friends, in some cases, for more than a year. These families are feeling the burden of providing care for refugees. In addition, these families and all host communities are feeling the impact of the rising price of food, water, energy and rents. Assistance programs should include Jordanian host communities that are experiencing dire need.
- **Expanding cash assistance and food vouchers:** The provision of cash assistance, as utilized in the Iraqi refugee response, should be expanded to include Syrian refugees. A cash assistance program and food vouchers would help refugees to pay for shelter—identified as one of the greatest needs—and could have a positive impact on the local economy. Cash assis-



Syrian refugee children at the Cyber City transit facility, Jordan. USCRI/November 2012

tance could also ease the burden for local families currently hosting refugees.

- **Livelihoods:** Efforts need to be focused on permitting refugees to access legal means of generating income for themselves and their families. Additional resources are needed for programs that focus on livelihoods and income-generating activities. The continuation of the conflict and the possibility of long-term displacement are creating a greater demand for legal means of livelihood so refugees can become self-supporting.
- **Outreach and assistance to unregistered refugees:** The registration and outreach efforts should be better used to identify vulnerable cases that need special assistance. In addition, the needs of those that remain unregistered should be addressed.

Addressing the needs of Iraqi refugees and Palestinians fleeing Syria

- It is important to continue to provide support and assistance to Iraqi refugees in Jordan and in the region. Greater emphasis is needed in relation to access to rights, particularly expanding legal access to work as a livelihood strategy. The resettlement of Iraqi refugees should continue to provide an important protection and durable solution. Palestinians fleeing the violence in Syria should be provided the same treatment and support afforded to Syrian refugees, including access to the bailout system and freedom of movement.

