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Issue 2016/03
February 2016



MIGRATION
POLICY CENTRE

The politics of pledging: reflections on the London donors conference for Syria

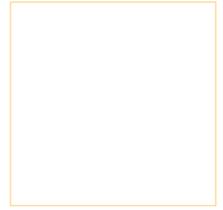
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Representatives of national governments, international organisations, businesses and NGOs assembled on 4 February in London for the high-profile conference “Supporting Syria & the Region”, jointly hosted by the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Kuwait and the United Nations.¹ After three previous pledging conferences on the Syria crisis that barely scraped together the necessary funding to keep Syrian refugees in the neighbouring states alive, this year witnessed a change in tack. Not only were funding expectations largely met, but the conference also aimed to develop an entirely new formula for integrating refugees into the neighbouring states that host them. Besides improving access to education, this centred on ways to allow Syrians to access the labour market. Now that the dust has settled a little, it may be time to ask: what are the chances for these aspirations to actually materialise?

This policy brief first looks at how the overall context of the pledging conferences has changed, and surveys the main promises and plans presented in the course of the conference. It then takes a critical look at the situation in Jordan – currently seen as the most promising candidate for sweeping policy change regarding its Syrian refugee population. It shows how the devil is in the details of governing Syrian labour and socio-economic development projects, and traces previous attempts for such changes. It argues that changing labour market regulations is not the silver bullet hoped for by the international community, but that real change can only come about if Europe rethinks its priorities vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis.

1. ‘Supporting Syria and the Region: London 2016’ (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

POLICY
BRIEF



New incentives for change

In comparison with past, much less successful pledging conferences, this round of talks was backdropped by the arrival of hundreds of thousands of individuals – a large part of them Syrian – to Europe over the course of the past year, as well as the deaths of many others. A felt need on the part of many governments to manage this influx of people and to prevent more from coming has made European and other donor countries acutely aware of the dire situation in which Syrians find themselves in Syria and its neighbouring states, and has increased their willingness to engage with the situation of refugees in the region.² After all, this is where the large majority of Syrian refugees currently live. Of the 4.6 million registered Syrian refugees in the region,³ Turkey has the highest absolute number (with 1.9 million), while Lebanon and Jordan have the highest per capita rates of Syrian refugees: around 25% of the population in Lebanon, and around 7-15% in Jordan, depending on who does the counting as well as who is counted.

Numbers are important. There has been a subtle competition between governments in the region to present the most dramatic indicators regarding the numbers of refugees and the concomitant hardships for host communities, so as to not be forgotten in the funding pledges. A week before the donors' conference, for example, the Government of Jordan released the preliminary results of the

2. See e.g. Kingsley, P.: 'Syrian refugees in Jordan: "If they cut the coupons, we will probably die"', *The Guardian*, 3 Feb 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).
3. In addition to that, there is an unknown number of Syrians displaced by the conflict within Syria as well as in the region, who are not registered as refugees. Saudi Arabia claims, for example, to have taken in up to a million Syrians since 2011; see De Bel-Air, F.: 'A note on Syrian refugees in the Gulf: Attempting to assess data and policies', Explanatory Note No. 11/2015, Gulf Labour Market and Migration (GLMM) programme of the Migration Policy Center (MPC) and the Gulf Research Center (GRC).

census conducted in November / December 2015.⁴ According to this document, there are almost 1.3 million Syrians currently residing in Jordan – more than twice as many as the 635,000 registered with UNHCR in the country. The government hopes that these numbers will reinforce the urgency of its call for sustained support from the international community.

From the donors' point of view, this support can no longer be humanitarian and financial only. The past few years already witnessed attempts to move the refugee response away from humanitarian thinking, which focused mostly on short-term emergency assistance, and towards a more development-oriented mindset that seeks to increase the resilience of refugees and local populations alike.⁵ However, up until this point there were certain red lines that everybody knew could not be crossed. More than anything, host states in the region – except for Turkey, none of them are signatories to the Geneva convention⁶ – did not want to allow refugees access to the labour market. While a large number of Syrians work informally, granting them formal access would mean an acknowledgement that Syrians are no longer temporary guests but will be staying for an indefinite amount of time – an idea that plays no better in the domestic politics of neighbouring states than it does in Europe. What is more, politicians view the large-scale provision of work permits to Syrians as unacceptable given the already significant unemployment of local populations, and oft-reported instances of tension between host communities and refugees over jobs

4. See Ghazal, M.: 'Population stands at around 9.5 million, including 2.9 million guests'. *The Jordan Times*, 30 Jan 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).
5. See 'Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2015-2016 in Response to the Syria Crisis: Regional Strategic Overview', UNDP & UNHCR, 2015.
6. Turkey has signed the Geneva Convention but applies it only to citizens of member states of the Council of Europe.



and resources. Accordingly, attempts to involve Syrians in livelihoods programming were refuted or refused by host governments for years. In consequence, support to Syrian refugees often had to continue to focus on food and cash assistance, although these forms of support decreased due to severe cuts in donor funding. These have further contributed to the destitute situation of many refugees in the region.⁷

In the lead-up to the London conference, however, the wind has changed. The movements of refugees and migrants to Europe have thrown not only Syrian refugees' increasing material hardship into stark relief, but also their frustration with their (lack of) options in the neighbouring states. The search for dignity has compelled many to head for Europe, or, disturbingly, return to Syria.⁸ The realisation that it takes more than keeping people alive to stop them from migrating has moved the question of employment to centre stage. Access to formal employment and education are now seen as core elements of a new strategy. Donors and international organisations have been pushing for significant changes in this regard, trying to gauge what is needed to convince the host governments to follow suit in a series of shuttle diplomacy visits.

Pledges, promises and plans

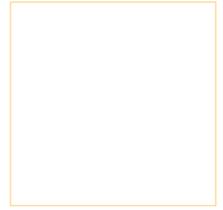
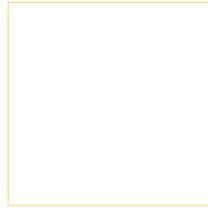
On first glance, this process seems to have been relatively successful. The sums pledged at the London donors conference were higher than at any of the three previous conferences. Even though the

almost six billion USD pledged so far do not meet the nine billion USD requested by UNHCR for 2016, two-thirds fulfilment is seen as a very good starting sign. In addition, significant additional pledges have already been made for the following three years. Particularly Germany and Britain, who already occupied the second and third spots on the list of bilateral donors behind the US, have upped their promised funding. Their choices follow different logics. Germany has received the largest numbers of refugees and is thus trying to curb further movements, whereas Britain has consistently pursued the strategy of paying more for the regional refugee response while denying entry to substantial numbers of refugees.⁹ Other countries like France, Norway and Italy have stepped up their pledges as well.¹⁰

In addition, Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) and donors announced around 40 billion USD in loans. A small percentage of these (around 4%) are being made available on concessional terms, meaning that they have considerably lower interest rates than normal loans for upper middle income countries like Jordan and Lebanon. These grants and loans are part of a package that seeks to explicitly support host countries' opening up of their labour markets to refugees, other elements of which include easier access to external (esp. European) markets and increased external support for job creation programmes. This, theoretically at least, should benefit local populations and refugees alike. A variety of such measures were mentioned in the concluding statements of the conference. They make it seem like a new era in responding to the refugee crisis has begun. The co-hosts' conference declaration boldly states that "with these efforts,

7. See e.g. CARE Jordan: '5 Years Into Exile. The challenges faced by Syrian refugees outside camps in Jordan and how they and their host communities are coping'. Amman, June 2015; UNHCR et al: 'Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, 2015 Report', Dec 2015 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).
8. see e.g. Achilli, L.: 'Back to Syria? Conflicting patterns of mobility among Syrian refugees in Jordan', *Orient*, I, 2016, 7-13.

9. Harding, L., P. Oltermann & N. Watt: 'Refugees welcome? How UK and Germany compare on migration'. *The Guardian*, 2 Sept 2015 (accessed 10 Feb 2016)
10. 'Co-host's statement annex: fundraising', *Supporting Syria & the Region, London 2016* (accessed 10 Feb 2016).



we estimate that up to 1.1m jobs will be created for refugees from Syria and host country citizens in the region by 2018.”¹¹

Seductive words, but the route to substantive policy changes with regard to employment – let alone to mass employment creation – is much more complicated. Turkey has recently passed new legislation that theoretically enables Syrians to access the formal labour market. Not much has changed on the ground yet, not least because of on-going negotiations with EU countries over funding and reciprocation. Thus, it remains to be seen what will come of these formal modifications.¹² The Lebanese government, in turn, has stressed that it is not willing to change any of its current labour legislation, which largely prevents Syrians from working in the country legally. As a symbolic concession, it proposes to establish a pilot employment project that will set up small and medium enterprises that can provide permanent employment for Lebanese and temporary employment for Syrians. At the same time, GoL officials stress that this project is part of facilitating Syrians’ return to Syria or resettlement elsewhere.¹³

While Turkey may be the bigger fish, many policy-makers currently see Jordan as the most promising laboratory for testing new approaches to the refugee crisis. The idea floated by international advisors is to foster a Syrian economy in exile, thereby incubating a post-conflict economy that can be transplanted into Syria when the time comes. This could be done, so the argument goes, by establishing or re-purposing a number of Special

Economic Zones focused on manufacturing, especially in the northern governorates where a majority of Syrian refugees are concentrated. Composed of international and Syrian companies employing both Syrians and Jordanians, such an endeavour would purportedly not only solve the issue of Syrian employment but simultaneously help Jordan to finally become a serious player in manufacturing, thereby killing two birds with one stone.¹⁴ This idea has been officially embraced. The statement made by the Jordanian government after the conference envisions “turning the Syrian refugee crisis into a development opportunity that attracts new investments and opens up the EU market (...), creating jobs for Jordanians and Syrian refugees whilst supporting the post-conflict Syrian economy”.¹⁵

The devil is in the details: debating policy change in Jordan

While this stance has been welcomed by many in the international arena, it stands in marked contrast to the more common narrative of Jordanian officials. This second narrative, which has dominated the discussion in Jordan for years, is much more reluctant and cautious. It speaks of the suffering of the Jordanian population much more than the potential of a thriving Syrian economy. In the lead-up to the conference, King Abdullah II, the Jordanian Monarch, personally intervened on several occasions to underline the gravity of the situation. He emphasised that the wellbeing of hard-hit Jordanians is his first priority, and stressed that

11. ‘Co-hosts declaration from the Supporting Syria & the Region Conference, London 2016’ (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

12. Peers, S. & Roman, E.: ‘The EU, Turkey and the Refugee Crisis: What could possibly go wrong?’, *EU Law Analysis*, 5 Feb 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

13. ‘Bassil says London conference test for international community’, *The Daily Star*, 3 Feb 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

14. Betts, A. and Collier, P.: ‘Help Refugees Help Themselves: Let Displaced Syrians Join the Labor Market’, *Foreign Affairs*, 94(6), 20 Oct 2015 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

15. ‘The Jordan Compact: A New Holistic Approach between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the International Community to deal with the Syrian Refugee Crisis’, *Supporting Syria & the Region, London 2016* (accessed 10 Feb 2016)



Jordan will not continue to accommodate Syrian refugees without significant international support. “How can we be a contributor to regional stability if we are let down by the international community?” he asked provocatively. Other politicians have made it equally clear that Jordan will not change its policies or continue to provide support at current levels unless grants, loans and substantial investments are forthcoming.¹⁶ This corresponds with much of public opinion. Even columnists that are usually sympathetic to the plight of Syrian refugees in the country are now starting to advocate for policy measures that demonstrably put Jordan ‘first’.¹⁷

First reactions from Jordanian officials after the conference were positive and displayed satisfaction with the promised funding and concessions on offer. The Minister of Planning, for example, reportedly described the EU’s announcement to reconsider and simplify rules of origin on Jordanian exports as a breakthrough that would create tens of thousands of jobs.¹⁸ Yet the question remains if things will work out as intended. Actual funding has consistently fallen short of the initial pledges in past years. Also, the facilitation of EU trade regulations and similar concessions are mere statements of intent so far. It is unclear what actual compromises will look like or what they will actually change.

Arguably, the creation of tens of thousands of jobs in special development zones will hinge on much more than concessionary loans and simplified rules of origin for Jordanian exports to the EU (one of the facilitation measures on offer). This is not the first time Jordan will attempt to reinvent

its economic base. Since the mid-1990s, it has experimented with special development zones and different types of preferential free-trade agreements – Qualified Industrial Zones, the Aqaba Special Economic Zone, and a number of smaller Special Development Zones across the country. While some of these initiatives have been reasonably successful in attracting foreign investors and raising export levels, they have not been able to meet many of the hopes and expectations placed in them. None of them has managed to square the circle of developing a sustainable, globally competitive model that simultaneously creates local jobs.¹⁹ The percentage of local labour in the Qualified Industrial Zones – ostensibly meant to boost local employment – has remained low because most Jordanians are unwilling to work for such low wages and under bad, sweat-shop like working conditions. Most of these jobs are thus currently filled by migrants from south Asia.²⁰ This experience could very well repeat itself in the zones anticipated now. Instead of being a magic bullet, they could end up creating very little employment for both Jordanians and Syrian refugees. While Syrians in Jordan are known to work for low wages given their current predicament, experts have strongly questioned whether they could conceivably be slotted into the economic model of the QIZ. These have historically been staffed by single female migrant workers, who are able to make do on very little money because they live in worker compounds and have few in-country expenses. This is not the case for Syrians, who very often must support families – including

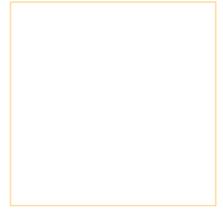
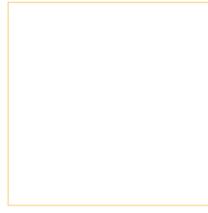
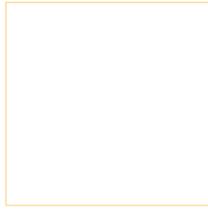
16. See e.g. ‘Gov’t spokesman urges international community to shoulder its responsibilities towards refugees’, *Ammon-news*, 1 Feb 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

17. e.g. Khitan, F.: ‘The London Conference – Jordan’s interests first’ (Arabic). *Al-Ghad*, 31 Jan 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

18. Obeidat, O. & Malkawi, K.: ‘Jordan succeeded in attracting world’s attention, help — PM’, *The Jordan Times*, 7 Feb 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

19. De Bel-Air, F. and Dergarabedian, A.: ‘Migrations de travail, globalisation et politique. Les zones industrielles qualifiantes (QIZ) de Jordanie’, in De Bel-Air, F. (ed.), *Migration et politique au Moyen-Orient*, Beirut: Institut Français du Proche-Orient, 2006, 39-60; Moore, P. W.: ‘The newest Jordan: Free trade, peace and an ace in the hole’, *MER Online*, 26 June 2003 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

20. Kalan, J.: ‘Workers rights: Migrant workers in Jordan are making their voices heard’, *ILO News*, 12 Feb 2012 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).



paying rent – who are living in Jordan as well.²¹ Acknowledging that current plans might be overly optimistic, voices in Jordan’s Ministry of Planning have already conceded that the number of jobs that might emerge based on the anticipated investments might be much less than officially projected.²²

Apart from the question of demand for such employment, we also do not know how many Syrians will ultimately be allowed access to it, or to the wider Jordanian labour market as a whole. In theory, it has been possible for Syrians in Jordan to obtain work permits since the beginning of the mass influx. There is no special legislation for refugee populations. Rather, Syrian refugees have continued to be treated as migrant workers. This has had several consequences: for one, it has meant that only a limited number of professions are open to them – a fact that has, for example, prevented most white-collar professionals from working in their fields of expertise. Changes to this policy have not been discussed to date. On the contrary, government representatives have assured local audiences that these regulations will remain in place.²³ Two, it has meant that the specific vulnerabilities and problems that come with being a refugee have been largely neglected, and hence the process of obtaining work permits has been blurry at best. Refugees are often unable to fulfil the requirements for the application, e.g. showing a valid passport, or proper documentation of their ‘bailout’ from Al-Za’atari refugee camp. On top of this, while the fees for a work permit are formally paid by the employer, in practice Syrian workers themselves must often provide the cash to do so.

With an annual cost of anywhere between 170 and 800 JOD (248 and 1,128 USD), it is utterly unfeasible for most Syrians to actually apply for permits.²⁴ As a result of these manifold requirements, the amount of work permits given to Syrians to date has been relatively negligible. Syrians have also faced increasing restrictions on their freedom of movement in the country, including being forcibly returned to Za’atari camp if found without proper documentation. Such policing, combined with not infrequent raids on worksites, makes it difficult for many to find (and keep) work at all.²⁵ This means that changes are not just needed on the legal level, but also in the minutia of the application process. It also means that one set of policies cannot contradict another, and this requires harmonising goals at a broader level of strategy.

Another aspect that will make it hard to change policies in practice is the widespread charge that Syrians are crowding out Jordanians from the labour market. Such oft-repeated arguments need to be treated with caution. While the Syrian crisis has certainly exacerbated pre-existing problems related to infrastructure, resources and services, the picture is more complicated when it comes to the labour market. While some such competition does occur among low-skilled informal labourers, available studies show that competition between Syrians and Jordanians is actually quite limited because they rarely work in the same sectors. Syrian men most often take jobs in construction, retail, and services, employment which most Jordanians eschew due to low pay and harsh working conditions. As a result, competition is often primarily between Syrians themselves, or between Syrians and Egyptian migrant workers.²⁶ Yet despite this evidence the

21. Al-Sarayrah, R.: ‘Issue of Syrian employment in Jordan among the priorities of the London donor conference’ (Arabic), *Al-Ghad*, 24 Jan 2016 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

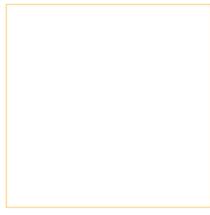
22. See Kingsley, op. cit.

23. ‘Gov’t sends messages of assurance over integrating Syrians into labour force’, *The Jordan Times*, 11 Feb 2016 (accessed 11 Feb 2016)

24. International Labour Organization: ‘Work permits for Syrian refugees’, Amman, 2015 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

25. See Francis, A.: ‘Jordan’s Refugee Crisis’, Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 Sept 2015 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

26. Stave, S. E. and Kattaa, M.: ‘Labour force and unemploy-



argument that Syrians are crowding out Jordanians from the labour market remains omnipresent in public discourse. This will make it hard to change gear and open up the labour market for Syrians. To wit, in the lead-up to the London conference Jordanian officials announced that a significant percentage of the jobs created in the Special Economic Zones to be will be reserved for Jordanians. Yet if these jobs do not attract enough Jordanian labour, as in the past, it may well provide an excuse for further delaying the issuance of work permits to Syrians, thereby maintaining the status quo. Many in Jordan would prefer this. Even if more voices than ever before are now publicly arguing that Jordan can only gain from officially integrating Syrians into the labour force, their voices are still overshadowed by the dominant anti-integrationist rhetoric.²⁷

In fact, this is not the first time official commitments were made to open up the labour market. In November 2015, the Jordanian government already agreed in negotiations with donors and international organisations to open up the formal labour market to Syrians through a series of measures, provided that this decision is not publicised in the media.²⁸ This goes to show that many conflicting interests must be negotiated for any substantive progress to be achieved in this area. There is a large variety of governmental agencies and political groupings in the country that relate to Syrians in Jordan in different ways – some through a security lens, others through a humanitarian approach, and yet others with a view to increasing possible crisis-related funding. Even though a new chord has now

[ment trends among Jordanians, Syrians and Egyptians in Jordan: 2010-2014](#), Beirut: ILO & FAFO, Nov 2015 (accessed 2 Feb 2016).

27. See Al-Khatib, B. and Lenner, K. for RLS (eds.): *Alternative Voices on the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan: An Interview Collection*, Ramallah: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2015 (accessed 10 Feb 2016).

28. Interview by the author with ILO livelihoods specialist, Amman, Nov. 2015.

been struck in public, this does not mean that these diverging perspectives will suddenly disappear. Balancing them will remain a challenge with an unclear outcome, and will keep feeding into the way the thorny issue of employment is handled.

No silver bullets

On top of all this, even if labour market integration becomes a reality it will not be the silver bullet hoped for by European policy makers. The possibility of formal sector jobs will not keep Syrians from leaving the region. People decide to move for a variety of reasons, which cannot be reduced to economic factors alone.²⁹ Rather than just pressuring neighbouring states to open up their labour markets, European countries would do well to devise ways to get Syrian refugees to Europe safely, distribute them justly, and give them a chance for a dignified life in Europe, or more will die off the European coast.

Tens of thousands of people are currently fleeing from Aleppo for Turkey, where they will become refugees if they are lucky enough to be let in. How to stop the situation from getting even worse? In the end, the only real way to prevent the further exacerbation of the refugee crisis is a political resolution to the Syrian conflict. That requires a very different sort of conference than the one we saw in London, but it would certainly do more to solve the problem than tightening the screws on neighbouring countries. But peace talks have just been postponed again, with no resolution in sight. While raised levels of support and cautious indications of stronger future integration of Syrian refugees in the neighbouring states are certainly cause for hope, many open questions remain – including where Europe's priorities should lie.

29. See Achilli, L.: 'Tariq al-Euroba - Displacement Trends of Syrian Asylum Seekers to the EU', *MPC RR 2016/01*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Florence: European University Institute, 2016.

Migration Policy Centre

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