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## Back to Syria?

### Conflicting patterns of mobility among Syrian refugees in Jordan

#### I. Introduction

“Syria has become the great tragedy of this century”, says former UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), António Guterres: “a disgraceful humanitarian calamity with suffering and displacement unparalleled in recent history.”<sup>1</sup> Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, it is estimated that around 12 million people have fled their homes. A bleak scenario seems to be playing out against the backdrop of a Europe crumbling under the sheer weight of mounting waves of refugees. Dramatic photos of refugees en route circulate in the media and fuel fears in Europe, aptly manipulated by political parties, that EU member states will be soon overrun by this blur of humanity. All this has produced political heat across Europe. Many political leaders and a compliant media cry out for the need to stop the Syrian exodus. However, all these accounts seem to overlook the fact that fewer than 700,000 Syrians declared asylum in the European Union from the beginning of the crisis to October 2015.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, according to the UNHCR, over 7.5 million are internally displaced (IDPs) and almost 4.5 million have fled seeking refuge in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the full glare of the media spotlight seems to remain focused on the European case. The supposedly epic proportion of the Syrian flow to Europe distracts from the growing number of those refugees who have little if no intention of going to Europe.

Although the number of refugees coming to Europe has risen dramatically over the last year, the depiction of Syrian refugees as a mass of people waiting to seize the best opportunity to leave their country and go to Europe is problematic. Not only must we seriously entertain the possibility that many Syrian refugees in Europe may perceive their stay only as a temporary strategy pending their return to Syria. A considerable number of refugees living in Syria’s immediate neighbours – Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan – actually returned to their war-ravaged country rather than facing an unknown future in any of the EU member states. In Jordan, for example, the number of new arrivals now seems to be lower than of those voluntarily returning to Syria. Most importantly, the majority of refugees in the country are today considering a prompt return to their homeland as an option if the protraction of the Syrian crisis further limits their income earning and employment opportunities.<sup>4</sup> By focusing on Syrian refugees living in Jordan,<sup>5</sup> this article will look at the consequences of the protracted displacement of refugees in Jordan. What will be argued here is that the refugees’ decision to travel cannot be reduced to a mere self-interest or cost–benefit analysis. Seeking refuge has to be understood as the outcome of a complex process of decision making motivated by a range of factors, not least the refugees’ affective relationship with their country.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *Two million Syrians are refugees*, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, *Europe: Syrian Asylum Applications*, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, *Jordan Inter-Sector Working Group Update*, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> This article is based on the author’s field research in Jordan. Research for this paper was carried out from May 2012 and December 2014, and complemented by return trips in October and November 2015. The collection of data has mainly relied on individual/key informants’ interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews of refugees, aid personnel, scholars and other relevant stakeholders were based on a schedule of questions covering key thematic areas of interest e.g. migration flows, push and pull factors, protection issues, international and national laws etc.

## II. Syrian Refugees in Jordan

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the large influx of refugees to Jordan was generally accompanied by demonstrations of solidarity, hospitality and tolerance from the host society towards the newcomers. Family ties as well as linguistic and cultural relations between Syrian refugees and the members of Jordanian host communities have facilitated the reception of Syrians in the Kingdom of Jordan. However, the protracted nature of the crisis is now affecting the relationship between the two communities. As of November 2015, over 633,000 Syrians have registered with the UNHCR in Jordan.<sup>6</sup> The massive numbers of refugees over almost five years has had a serious impact on the already meagre Jordanian national resources. All this has meant that Jordanians, who at first welcomed refugees, have become hostile: those who were originally *ḍuyūf* (guests) are now *lājiʿīn* (refugees). The belief that refugees are thriving on scarce local resources is common amongst increasingly resentful host communities. There is also the widespread belief among less advantaged Jordanians that Syrian refugees thrive thanks to a lavishly generous international community that is fulfilling the needs of the latter while leaving the former stranded and without resources.

According to the Jordanian Economic and Social Council, the Syrian crisis has cost the country USD 1.2 billion, and the financial burden is expected to rise to USD 4.2 billion by 2016.<sup>7</sup> Jordan's international trade has been gravely affected by the loss of one of the principal points of access to regional trade through Syria. A recent study reveals that the

Syrian crisis has had a particularly negative impact on Jordanian structural vulnerabilities. The available services within the hosting communities have grown thinner, raising serious concerns over the availability of already limited resources: the chronic lack of safe drinkable water, for instance. The influx of refugees has also increased the demand on schools, sanitation, housing, food and energy to an intolerable extent. In particular, the arrival of Syrian refugees seems to have had a negative impact on Jordan's housing sector. Rent prices have tripled or even quadrupled in border zones and other areas of high refugee density. As the majority of Syrians do not live in camps, this rise can be explained by the sharp increase in demand for housing and by the refugees' capacity to afford higher prices by sharing housing with others to bring down costs.<sup>8</sup>

The protracted nature of the crisis is now aggravating the relationship between the two communities. It should be noted, however, that Syrian refugees are blamed for a variety of issues that have always plagued Jordan's dysfunctional infrastructure and stagnant economic market. The job market constitutes another point of friction. Work permits are not being issued to Syrians, principally due to prohibitive costs and administrative obstacles. Non-Jordanians with legal residency and a valid passport can obtain a work permit only if the prospective employer pays a fee and shows that the job requires experience or skills not to be found among the Jordanian population. Nonetheless, a recent UNHCR survey reports that only 1% of visited refugee households had a member with a work permit in Jordan.<sup>9</sup> Despite the official restrictions on

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Kilani, *A duty and a burden on Jordan*, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> REACH, *Evaluating the Effect of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on Stability and Resilience in Jordanian Host Communities*, 2015. It should be noticed that while rents continue to increase for both Jordanians and Syrians, the former tend to pay higher sums than Jordanian households. According to CARE International, "Shelter is reported as the single most pressing need. The average rental expenditure is JOD 166. Syrian households on average pay JOD 193 for rent, indicating a 28% increase from the baseline data for urban areas outside of Amman. Jordanians report lower monthly rental expenditure (JOD 107)." CARE, *Lives Unseen*, 2015, 8.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, *Living in the Shadow*, 2015, 28.

working, many refugees work informally. Jordanians often perceive Syrians as competitors for jobs, yet a recent report published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) shows not only that unemployment rates are not correlated with the areas with large influxes of Syrian refugees, but also that Syrian refugees are mainly working in jobs in the informal sector that are commonly performed by non-Jordanian migrant workers, such as Egyptians – e.g. in agriculture, construction, food service and retail.<sup>10</sup>

### III. A Protracted Emergency

As a result of this prolonged crisis, the situation has radically worsened for Syrian refugees in Jordan.

The Government of Jordan is not a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention, which relates to the status of refugees, or its 1967 Protocol. The country deals with refugees within certain margins of discretion. The large majority of refugees interviewed lamented the systematic restriction of their movement following the recent approval of a number of regulations by the host country. Ever since the second half of 2014, the Jordanian authorities have progressively restrained Syrian refugees' freedom of movement in urban areas. Refugees used to be able to register with the UNHCR no matter the status of their documentation. Since 14 July 2014, the government has instructed the UNHCR to stop issuing Asylum Seeker Certificates (ASCs) to Syrian refugees that have left the camps without proper "bail out" documentation. The ASC is indispensable for obtaining the Ministry of Interior (MoI) Service Card, which grants refugees access to public healthcare and education services in host communities. The new policy has consequently affected many Syrian households. Furthermore, the cards need to be renewed on a yearly basis. The cost of renewing a MOI card is JOD 50 for

each member, which makes it extremely expensive for large households. Refugees without a valid MoI card have to pay a fine; according to interviewees, the authorities deport those refugees who have not paid the fine within three months to either Syria or the refugee camps.

The majority of my interviewees also lamented the great challenges that they have to face to access basic services. For example, public hospitals – subsidised by the UN – were open to Syrian refugees for over three years after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. However, free healthcare provided to Syrians overburdened the country's capacity to maintain the service. Since July 2014, primary health care services are available to all registered Syrians at subsidised prices only upon the presentation of a health certificate. The certificate, however, is costly and covers only a limited range of health issues. As Mohammed – a refugee in his mid-thirties – explained, "if my daughter would need to go through surgical operation as happened three years ago [she has a heart issue], we would not be able to do anything for her as now we have to pay for this type of intervention. This is why I want to go to Europe; I simply cannot afford to stay in Jordan any longer". Furthermore, restrictions on freedom of movement have further infringed upon these services. In Jordan, valid residence permits are indispensable for obtaining access to public healthcare services in host communities. A recent NRC study in Jordan reports how the lack of proper health coverage is one of the greatest challenges faced by refugees with limited legal status.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, vulnerability is increasing, and refugees have often to resort to negative coping mechanisms to survive. Refugee families have coped with the status quo by liquidating the few assets that they were able to bring along with them, relying on hu-

<sup>10</sup> ILO, *The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on the Labour Market in Jordan*, 2015, 14.

<sup>11</sup> NRC, *In search of a home*, 2015.

manitarian assistance and working, mostly illegally. However, these work and humanitarian “opportunities” decreased steadily in 2014 and almost disappeared towards the end of 2014. An ILO study reports, for example, that close to half of the Syrian refugees’ families have one working child.<sup>12</sup> A previous UNWOMEN assessment reveals that 47% of paid employment in refugee households came from children.<sup>13</sup> Syrian families have also been readier to turn to early marriage, common in some parts of the Syrian community prior the war in order to ensure a better economic position and a safer space for their daughters.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the requirement to pledge not to work and the limitations on obtaining working permits render Syrians dependent on humanitarian assistance or debt. Syrians have heavily relied on humanitarian aid from the UNHCR and other NGOs. However, funding shortfalls have negatively affected humanitarian aid inflow for the past two years. In Jordan, as of September 2015, over half of urban refugees who had been receiving some food aid from the World Food Programme (WFP) lost their benefits.<sup>15</sup> The remaining half received only JOD 10 (USD 14) instead of the planned JOD 20 (USD 28) due to the ongoing funding crisis. Interviewed refugees in Jordan identified the imminent suspension of WFP assistance in urban areas as the deadline for their stay in the country.

#### IV. The Choice of Leaving

Against the backdrop of their deteriorating situation in Jordan, large numbers of Syrian refugees have expressed a desire to leave this host country. Many of them describe migration as a way of escaping their hardships in Jordan. However, even when the leaving is not in doubt, the destination is. While many wish to embark on journey to Europe, others consider the return to Syria their only option.

Socio-economic disparities amongst Syrian refugees certainly played a role in the decision to leave.<sup>16</sup> This may sound surprising. In popular and journalistic accounts all over the world, Syrian refugees are generally represented as a sea of humanity, an undistinguishable mass of individuals related to each other by a common condition of extreme destitution and poverty. Yet, while a shared sense of misery is an important aspect of the ways in which refugees imagine their condition in Jordan, this should not conceal the important forms of differentiation that are also part of the Syrian community. A closer scrutiny, indeed, reveals the existence of a geographical and socio-economic fragmentation within the composition of the refugee population. If this fragmentation has largely influenced Syrians’ patterns of accommodation in Jordan,<sup>17</sup> it is partly affecting the preferred destination today of refugees that want to leave the country.

<sup>12</sup> ILO, *Rapid Assessment on Child Labor in the Urban Informal Sector in Three Governorates of Jordan*, 2015. Also, note that many studies have shown how child labour amongst Syrian refugees is a widespread phenomenon, which is not perceived by local communities as being inherently negative. See, for example, Un Ponte Per, *Comprehensive Assessment on Syrian Refugees Residing in the Community in Northern Jordan*, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> UNWOMEN, *Gender-based Violence and Child Protection among Syrian refugees in Jordan, with a focus on Early Marriage*, 2015, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Note that Syrian refugees have also developed some positive coping strategies. One example is the relevance of community support as one of the main sources of income for many households. Care, *Syrian Refugees in urban Jordan report*, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> The World Food Programme (WFP) has recently reinstated food assistance until January 2016 to those refugees who have been without since September 2015. See Jordan Times, *WFP to reinstate food aid to 229,000 Syrian*, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> For a comparative study of current displacement trends to the EU amongst Syrian refugees living in the Middle East, see REACH, *Migration trends & patterns of Syrian asylum seekers travelling to the European Union*, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> See UNHCR, *Syrian Refugees Living Outside Camps in Jordan*, 2013.

Refugees living in Amman were generally keen to embark on an irregular journey to Europe. These were mostly medium-high skilled workers from Syrian urban areas. They believed they had the sufficient cultural capital for that: a westernised style of life and some fluency in English. Many of their relatives and friends were already living in Europe – generally in Sweden and Germany. Mahmood and his wife represent the category well. They are from a well-off neighbourhood of Damascus, are in their thirties and have two children. Mahmood was an engineer in Syria; his wife, Suhad, owned and worked in a pharmacist near their house. They left Syria in 2013 after a mortar shell hit and destroyed both their house and pharmacy. They headed towards Jordan. Jordanian authorities intercepted Mahmood and his family at the border, and took them to the Za’atari Camp. They spent only three hours there, for registration, and left soon after to Amman, where Suhad’s brother had moved a year earlier. “It is impossible to find a decent job in Jordan”, Mahmood claimed, and continued: “the Jordanian government asked me to provide proper documentation as an engineer but these are not available since in Syria these papers got lost during the war. [...] We filed a request for resettlement with the UNHCR when we moved to Jordan – our daughter is very sick – but we never heard back from them. I cannot wait anymore. Next week I will leave for Europe and I will ask for family reunification. My wife would like me to go to Sweden where her brother just moved. But I think I will go to Germany; my friends told me that life there is very good”.

Syrian refugees coming from rural areas generally showed a quite different attitude. Many were farmers and farm-workers from around Daraa with no or very little knowledge of English; the majority of them lived in Za’atari Camp or in Irbid and the villages nearby.<sup>18</sup> The refugees’ decision to leave for Europe cannot

be understood without an appropriate recognition of the complex demands of earning a living in a precarious economic context. Yet socio-economic status affects the decision to leave in a complex manner. It was not only a lack of means that set Syrians on a journey to Europe; these refugees may have been poorer than their counterparts in Amman, but they had still something left in Syria – their lands, on which they could have survived if they had returned. Furthermore, many refugees interviewed often argued that they did not want to go to Europe because they would never be able to integrate into a culture so different from theirs. As a Syrian man in his late sixties put it: “I felt lost when I first fled Syria to come to Jordan. I don’t want to feel lost twice”. He was living in a small village near the border with Syria. The man argued that there was no future in Jordan. He considered returning to Syria, where life was cheaper and where he owned a house. He excluded categorically the possibility of moving to Europe: he was too old and too different – he claimed – to get used to Europe. Furthermore, he did not want his daughters to live what he referred to as the immoral lifestyle of European countries. Like him, many other refugees faced forms of intense emotional distress generated not by a forced immobility but, on the contrary, by the very capacity to move.

The desire to move raises considerable concerns centred on the notions of community, family and parenting – leaving is rarely, if ever, an easy decision. A closer scrutiny of the refugees’ trajectories sheds light on their ambiguous relationship with the affective and political space of their homeland. While the refugees certainly desired to leave their host countries, they were not simply free-roaming individuals seeking to escape as soon as possible in order to pursue better economic conditions in Europe. The case of Umm Omar is poignant. This woman came to Amman, Jor-

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

dan, with her youngest son after the militias of Syria's dictator Bashar al-Assad supposedly killed her three older sons. Umm Omar called them *shuhadā'* (martyrs): "they are martyrs of the revolution", the woman claimed: "they fought against Bashar and died for *hurriya* (freedom)". She said this while flipping through the pictures on her mobile: some showing her children carrying machine guns, others portraying them laid out in their coffins just before burial. She told us how she had no doubt about returning to Syria: "I am not leaving [for Europe]. Where do you want me to go?! I am too old to leave. But even if I were younger, I would never do that: I would never leave my country. I am ashamed of all these *shabāb* (young men) who leave for Europe. They should stay in Syria and fight for freedom, as my children did". Her short comment enclosed a complex set of assumptions where gender, age and political allegiance are intertwined and ultimately affect the choice of destination.

## V. Conclusion

The Syrian refugees' personal accounts and life stories shed light on the variety of ways in which refugees negotiate the demands of mobility at a time of great socio-economic and political uncertainty. Over the past two years, Jordan has adopted harsher policies towards refugees by periodically closing its borders and limiting access to employment opportunities as well as to health and educational facilities. In the meantime, international donors are running out of funds and humanitarian agencies – such

as the WFP, for instance – have dramatically decreased their assistance to Syrians, pushing them to find better living conditions elsewhere. Against this backdrop, many refugees perceived departure to be the only solution to their predicament. The choice of the destination was made according to various criteria. Not all of them wanted to go to Europe; many showed a determination to return to Syria – despite the evident risks that a journey to their war-ravaged country would entail. My interviewees concurred that the journey to Europe was expensive and dangerous, and that the majority feared cultural estrangement once there, be their final destination Sweden, Germany or any other European country. They saw these problems in the media, heard about them from those who made it to Europe and extrapolated from those who vanished on the journey. However, while danger, costs and cultural estrangement held some back, they did not prevent many others from leaving or wishing to leave. What ultimately determined the decision whether to return to Syria or embark on a long journey to Europe were a number of interrelated factors generally linked to the socio-economic status, age and social network of the refugee-migrant. However, other factors also emerged into the picture, such as ideology, expectations and political considerations, amongst others. Patterns of refugee mobility challenge the notion that the choice of destination is made on the basis of a mere self-interest or cost-benefit analysis. By contrast, they show how the Syrian refugees' trajectories depend on complex frameworks of self and subjectivity.

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