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# Study of Inclusion Models and Representations of Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: A Comparative Summary

Myriam Ababsa, Jalal Al Hussein, Elsa Maarawi

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# Study of Inclusion Models and Representations of Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: A Comparative Summary

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January 2024



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## Foreword

Twelve years after the start of the war in Syria in March 2011, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is estimated at 1.5 million by Lebanese authorities, with over 800,000 registered by the UNHCR. In Jordan, the number is estimated to be around 1.3 million by authorities, while 650,000 are registered with the UNHCR. While Lebanon has been experiencing an economic, financial, social, and political crisis since 2019, there has been a rise in anti-Syrian discourse within the population and political class. These statements are accompanied by a growing criticism of international aid, which is perceived to primarily benefit Syrians at the expense of the Lebanese population, whose poverty levels have significantly increased. In Jordan, although discourse appears more moderate, tensions can be observed throughout the territory, especially in poor areas with lower hosting capacities. And as Syria rejoined the Arab League in May 2023, the question of the gradual return of Syrians to their country increasingly emerged within public opinion and government discourse.

The economic and social context in Lebanon and Jordan has also served as a source of tension against Syrian refugees. In general, geopolitical developments increasingly lead authorities of neighboring countries to Syria to call for the return of refugees, even organizing it in a coercive manner.

As part of the Research Chair on Urban Environments in the Middle East (AFD – Ifpo) sought to obtain analytical insights into the current situation of refugees and their integration within host countries. This comparative study was drafted based on two research reports which considered shifting representations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan. Both studies were conducted between August and November 2023, the first one in Lebanon by Elsa Maarawi, a sociologist and associate researcher at Ifpo, and the second in Jordan by Jalal Husseini, a political scientist, and Myriam Ababsa, a social geographer, both researchers associated with Ifpo.

This document presents a comparative summary of the two studies. In order to highlight the specificities of each national context, executive summaries of the two reports have been added in the appendices.

### **DISCLAIMER:**

*This research benefited from funding from the Agence Française de Développement (AFD).*

*Yet, the analyzes and conclusions of this document are formulated under the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the point of view of AFD, IFPO or their partner institutions.*

# Study of Inclusion Models and Representations of Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon:

## A Comparative Summary

Myriam Ababsa, Jalal Al Hussein, Elsa Maarawi  
associated researchers at Ifpo  
January 2024

### Introduction

With the support of the United Nations and Europe, Lebanon and Jordan have managed to host hundreds of thousands Syrian refugees each since 2011 (respectively 800,000<sup>1</sup> and 650,000 registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). This is particularly significant given that these states, with limited territories, suffer from endemic economic problems, high unemployment, a major financial crisis in the case of Lebanon, and a lack of foreign direct investments. Half of the Lebanese population – 3 million people – and a quarter of the Jordanian population – 2.5 million people – live below the poverty line (World Bank 2022). Three refugee camps were established for Syrians in Jordan (2012-2014), while Lebanon refused to create any, leaving the most deprived in regularly evicted informal settlements.

In Jordan, only 18% of Syrian refugees live in the country's three camps (the Zaatari camp, which opened in July 2012, the Azraq camp, opened in April 2014 under the administration of UNHCR, and the Emirati camp). The majority reside in urban areas: in Amman (30% of the total refugee population), Irbid (26%), Mafraq (20%), Zarqa (15%), and in other southern Jordanian governorates farther from the Syrian border (9%).<sup>2</sup> In Lebanon, where no camps have been created, Syrians live in informal settlements, mainly in the north (Akkar) and east of the country (Bekaa). Others rent apartments, occupy collective housing, or makeshift shelters (garages, construction buildings). In both countries, the refugee population is young, with 48% being under the age of 15.<sup>3</sup>

The continued presence of refugees in Lebanese territory is now perceived as a demographic threat, particularly by Christian political parties, as Syrians make up a quarter of the population

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<sup>1</sup> The Lebanese government provides a figure of 1.5 million Syrians, while the King of Jordan announced 1.3 million in 2014. From 2015, the Lebanese government requested the UNHCR to stop registering new Syrian refugees, counting only new births

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR. *Total Registered Syrian Refugees*. Operational Data Portal. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Tiltnes, Age et al. (2019). *The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps*. p.11. Fafo/MoPIC. <https://www.faf.no/images/pub/2019/20701.pdf>

and have a much higher fertility rate than Lebanese citizens, with more than 3 children per woman compared to the rate of 1.5 among Lebanese (ILO CAS 2019). In Jordan, although Syrian refugees constitute direct economic competition (making up 8.5% of the Kingdom's 11 million inhabitants in 2023), opinion polls highlight the very high levels of empathy expressed by the population towards their co-religionists (96% in 2023, HCR survey). However, as Syria rejoined the Arab League in May 2023, members of the government have started discussing publicly the issue of the gradual return of Syrians to their country.

In this context of economic crisis and normalization, two expert reports have assessed the representation of refugees in Lebanon and Jordan and considered the evolution of regulatory frameworks for reception (residency, access to services, and formalization of access to employment). They provide analysis of how Syrian refugees have come to be represented by governments, civil societies, and host communities, while highlighting the factors underlying these discursive constructions, as well as the impact that these representations have had on local and international responses to the “Syrian refugee crisis”. Representations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have followed the stages of state construction, while in Jordan, they oscillate between hospitality and security fears, but also serve as leverage for authorities to obtain more funding from international donors (in continuity with the geopolitical rent that hosting Palestinian refugees has constituted since 1948).

# 1. Regulatory Frameworks in Two Non-Signatory Countries to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees

As non-signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees, Lebanon and Jordan have established agreements with the UNHCR (in 1998 for Jordan and 2003 for Lebanon) which define the responsibilities of each party. Only Palestinian refugees are considered political refugees. Others are regarded as invited guests and are (more or less) well-received depending on their religious affiliation and country of origin.

*Table 1: Political and Social Framework*

<b>Common Political and Social Framework in Lebanon and Jordan toward Refugees</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Non-signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees (in solidarity with the exile of Palestinian refugees and their right to return).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1998 between the Jordanian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and in 2003 between the Lebanese government and UNHCR.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lebanon is defined as a transit country, not an asylum for refugees.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Only Palestinian refugees are considered political refugees.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Citizens in Jordan are well-integrated (only 20% in camps).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Half of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are confined to camps, and are seen as posing a threat of permanent settlement (notion of "<i>tawtin</i>"), with the refusal by the Lebanese authorities to consider Lebanon as a substitute homeland.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A quarter of Jordan's population (11 million) is poor (World Bank 2022). But the integration of refugees is facilitated by the fact that they are mostly Sunni, with few minority Christians, and almost no Alawites or Shiites.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Half of Lebanon's population (6 million) is below the poverty line (World Bank 2022). Rebalancing confessional representation in favor of Sunnis is problematic.</li> </ul>

## 1.1. Political and Social Framework for the Reception of Refugees in Jordan:

Jordanian legislation regarding the reception of refugees is limited. The current constitution, promulgated in 1952, states in Article 21, paragraph 1, that "political refugees [who have left their country of origin] due to their political principles or defense of freedom will not be extradited." In practice, only Palestinians who left their homes in the part of Palestine that became Israel during the first Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948 and Displaced Persons from 1967 from the West Bank and Gaza Strip during and after the Six-Day War (1967) are considered individuals with the right to reside in Jordanian territory while awaiting a durable resolution of their situation through a return to their homes or compensated resettlement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> According to the terms of Resolution 194 (III) paragraph 11 of the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948, the anchoring of Palestinian refugees in Jordan is confirmed with the naturalization of refugees from 1948 in Transjordan (current Jordan) and in the West Bank, which the Hashemite Kingdom annexed in 1950. The displaced individuals from Gaza who arrived in Jordan between June 1967 and July 1968 (the "ex-Gazans") remained foreigners to whom Jordan would grant travel



The dominance of the issue of Palestinian refugees in the Jordanian and pan-Arab political agenda has tended to exclude any other category of forced migrants who arrived in the decades that followed. This includes Iraqis during and after the Ba'athist era, Sudanese and Somalis, as well as the "refugees of the Arab Spring" in 2011, namely Yemenis and Syrians. The latter constitute approximately 89% of those registered with the UNHCR (655,283 out of 733,597 as of August 2023).<sup>5</sup> Non-Palestinian refugees are therefore considered, according to national legislation, "temporary visitors" or "invited guests" who are not accommodated based on a rule of law but, according to several authors, based on a principle of hospitality rooted in Bedouin, Arab, and Islamic traditions that Jordan sees itself as inheriting and that goes beyond the mere right of asylum.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2. Political and Social Framework for the Reception of Refugees in Lebanon:

The relations between Lebanon and Syria are particularly complicated, given that the theory of Greater Syria includes Lebanon and that Syria occupied the country from 1982 to 2005. Labor migrations from Syria to Lebanon continued until the beginning of the 2011 war (Chalcraft 2009). In 2014, the Lebanese General Security defined a list of categories allowing Syrians to cross the border.<sup>7</sup> This list restricts the entry of individuals who have no status (family, professional, residence, property, etc.) in Lebanon, severely limiting access for those fleeing Syria for humanitarian reasons. Starting in 2015, the rules for obtaining a residence permit were tightened: access to a paid residence permit is conditioned on obtaining a registration certificate with the UNHCR or a work permit under the kafala system.<sup>8</sup> According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), 80% of Syrians in Lebanon do not have a residence permit.<sup>9</sup>

The Lebanese political class is divided between those in favor of hosting/anti-Syrian regime and those against hosting/supportive of the same regime. In 2012, Lebanese President Michel Sleiman attempted to resolve this political issue by bringing together proponents of both approaches – welcoming and assisting versus eliminating for security. This resulted in the Baabda Declaration of June 12, 2012, endorsed by the UN Security Council<sup>10</sup>: a compromise – known as the "disassociation" policy – among Lebanese political parties aimed at keeping Lebanon free from interference in the Syrian conflict. This position is sometimes attributed to

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permits and identity cards in the late 1980s, but without conferring Jordanian citizenship upon them. Both refugees in Jordan (since 1948) and those who came from the West Bank or Gaza in 1967 can register with a humanitarian agency created exclusively to meet their basic needs: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

<sup>5</sup> Source: External Statistical Report on UNHCR Registered Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Jordan as of 31 August 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/103186>

<sup>6</sup> *El-Abed Oroub* (2014). "The discourse of Guesthood: Forced Migrants in Jordan" in Fabos, Anita and Osotalo, Riina (eds) *Managing Muslim Mobilities*, Palgrave; Ghofran, Hela (23 October 2021). "Refugees as guests of Jordan and the Arab hospitality". *Routed Magazine*. Issue no.17.

<sup>7</sup> The list is published on the website of the Ministry of Interior: <https://general-security.gov.lb/ar/posts/33>

<sup>8</sup> This means the obligation to find a Lebanese sponsor before applying for a residence permit. The sponsor vouches for the individual with the authorities in exchange for compensation. (El Khoury -Tannous et al, 2018)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nrc.no/countries/middle-east/lebanon/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://press.un.org/fr/2015/cs11824.doc.htm>

the pre-existing institutional ambiguity before the Syrian crisis, allowing the Syrians to remain in a necessary and accepted informality (Nassar and Stel 2019).

Shiite political parties (Amal and Hezbollah) emphasize the need to restore diplomatic relations with Damascus, and the expulsion of Syrians is supported in this context to maintain good relations with the neighbor and counter the Sunni jihadist presence in Lebanon<sup>11</sup>. As for Sunni political figures, the discourse is divided. Traditionally anti-Syrian regime and sharing many cultural and social traits with the Syrians, criticism of the Syrian presence in poor Sunni regions serves to divert attention from the true reasons for the current economic and social crisis in Lebanon<sup>12</sup>.

## 2. From humanitarian reception (2011-2013) to security retreat (2014-2018) and then to social policies (2019-2023)

If the presence of refugees is more concerning in Lebanon than in Jordan, it is striking to see that the chronology of the phases of reception presents similarities (Table 2). In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, both countries chose a humanitarian reception policy by opening their borders (2011-2013). Faced with the considerable and poorly controlled influx of 2013, with a thousand refugees entering per day in each country, the question of the presence of jihadist fighters emerged. The Syrian conflict intensified at the Jordanian borders (Deraa) and on Lebanese territory (Battle of Arsal in 2014). A second security phase began in 2014, marked by border closures and refugee re-registration in Jordan. From the summer of 2015, Europe insisted that Middle Eastern states (especially Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan) provide formal working conditions for refugees and keep them in their territories in exchange for facilitated access to the European market. The Compacts came into effect in February 2016.

*Table 2. Syrian Refugees Inclusion Policies Phases in Lebanon and Jordan (2011-2023)*

PHASES	1. Humanitarian 2011-2013	2. Security 2014-2018	3. Social 2019-2023
Number of Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR	Lebanon: April 2012: 18,000 2013: 800,000  Jordan: 1,000 per day in 2013, totaling 650,000	Lebanon: April 2014: 1 million January 2015: UNHCR stops registrations (approximately 1.5 million)  Jordan:	Lebanon: 2019: 950,000 2023: 790,000  Jordan: 650,000 in 2023 Few returns

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a political analyst from an online newspaper on August 23, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Idem

		650,000, but the government announces 1.3 million	
Laws and measures in effect during the period	<p>Lebanon: 2003 Agreement Protocol with the UNHCR Baabda Declaration 2012</p> <p>Jordan: 1998 Agreement Protocol with the UNHCR initially for Iraqi refugees</p>	<p>Lebanon: Curfew in several municipalities Halt to UNHCR registration Land entry restrictions in May 2015 New residency access rules</p> <p>Jordan: Border closure in 2014 and re-registration</p>	<p>Lebanon: Regulation of access to jobs Forced return of irregular Syrians implemented by the Lebanese Army.</p>
Security policies	<p>Lebanon: Welcoming of Syrians in Bekaa and Akkar Some pushback, differential reactions from municipalities</p> <p>Jordan: Opening of three refugee camps with police station. Ministry of Interior service card</p>	<p>Lebanon: Curfews imposed on Syrians in several Lebanese localities. Waves of concealed forced returns</p> <p>Jordan: Border closure and restrictions in 2014</p>	<p>Lebanon: Lebanese revolution in 2019, Covid crisis 2020 Announced and officially implemented forced returns.</p> <p>Jordan: Re-registration and residence permit only to registered refugees or workers with permit</p>
Integration into the job market	<p>Historical presence of Syrian workers, especially in Lebanon, seasonal in the fall in Jordan.</p> <p>300,000 before the war in Lebanon, 30,000 in Jordan.</p> <p>They could enter with an ID card and stay for 6 months in Lebanon before 2011.</p>	<p>Pressure from Europe starting in August 2015 to provide formal working conditions for Syrians in the Middle East.</p> <p>The policy begins in February 2016 with the Compacts (World Bank, EU).</p>	<p>The obligation to obtain a work permit in 2019. Closure of some informal Syrian businesses.</p>
Access to services	<p>Humanitarian aid is perceived as a form of dumping, allowing Syrians to enter unfair competition, as they receive additional income from international aid.</p>	<p>The UNICEF No Lost Generation campaign to reintegrate children into schools in Lebanon and Jordan.</p>	<p>Rising tensions around services.</p>
Representations	<p>Welcomed as brothers. Concerns mainly focus</p>	<p>The opportunistic poor becomes a terrorist</p>	<p>Existential fear related to demographic threat and</p>

	on competition in employment and housing.	threat, a criminal. Impunity for committed crimes. The idea that they take advantage of humanitarian	confessional imbalance in Lebanon.  Negative representations (UNDP, Ark 2023) in Lebanon and positive in Jordan (UNHCR 2023).
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(Table conceived by Ababsa, Husseini, Maarawi. 2024)

### 3. The question of the economic integration of Syrian refugees (2016-2023)

#### 3.1. Economic Integration in Jordan:

Since the end of 2014, a process of widespread "normalization" in relations between the Jordanian and Syrian populations has begun to take shape. Grievances against Syrian refugees, articulated to varying degrees, have not disappeared, but their social and political impact is mitigated by various factors. First, the closure of borders to Syrians between 2014 and 2016 provided assurances to the most exposed communities that the "Syrian refugee crisis" is now under control. Second, a gradual process of socialization has occurred between Jordanians and Syrians through neighborhood and continuous professional relationships, reinforced by a common cultural background. It becomes evident that despite the international financial aid they receive, the living conditions of Syrian refugees remain precarious; both Jordanians and Syrians are victims of a situation beyond their control.<sup>13</sup> The arrival of the Syrians had only accentuated (and not created) weaknesses in the country's economic governance, which had traditionally favored major cities, particularly the capital Amman, at the expense of entire rural governorates like Mafraq.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, with their expertise in entrepreneurship and skills in areas such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and catering, Syrians have contributed to the development of the local economy.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the configuration of international assistance evolved from 2016 towards a new distribution of beneficiaries of social projects and support for vocational training and employment, now favoring members of host communities according to a two-thirds (Jordanians) / one-third (Syrian refugees) quota.

Two trends prompted Jordan and its donors to modify their approach and representation of Syrian refugees in 2016, turning them into an economic development asset for the country. Firstly, the migration crisis in European countries in 2014-2015 led the European Union, one

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mercy Corps, November 2020. This is also the conclusion of a study conducted by the Universities of Jordan and Stanford, which suggests that feelings of social and cultural proximity now outweigh those of adversity and competition for access to services; Alrababa'h, Ala' *et.al.* (2020).

<sup>14</sup> Since 2015, the number of publications addressing issues of intercommunal tensions has sharply decreased. On the ground, across the territory, general attention and protest movements have shifted towards government policies that struggle to restore job-bearing growth and manage the Syrian crisis; interviews with Mercy Corps regarding the situation in Mafraq and Irbid, November 2020

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with the mayor and the President of the Chamber of Commerce of Mafraq, June 8, 2015. The number of businesses, including small shops, grew by 1.9%, increasing from 4,808 to 5,495 between 2011 and 2018. DOS, 2011, 2018, *Economic Establishment Census*.

of Jordan's main donors, to seek arrangements with key host countries to facilitate the temporary stay of refugees, including their inclusion in the formal labor market. Secondly, aware that the presence of Syrian refugees was likely to persist and increasingly strain finances and public services, Jordanian leaders contemplated transforming the Syrian refugee crisis into an "opportunity for development." On these grounds, Jordan and its major donors, including the European Union, prepared an agreement concluded in February 2016: the Jordan Compact. This agreement envisages the regularization, through obtaining a work permit issued by the Ministry of Labor, of approximately 200,000 Syrian workers informally employed in sectors less attractive to the Jordanian workforce (sectors that have also attracted Egyptian and Asian migrant workers), such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and catering. Emphasis is also placed on refugee employment in export-oriented manufacturing industries. In exchange, donors commit to better finance the Jordan Response Plans (JRP), provide favorable concessional loans, revive international investments, and facilitate the export of manufactured goods from Jordan to European countries.<sup>16</sup> This windfall is supposed to boost the country's economic growth, particularly its industrial sector, creating additional jobs for Jordanian and Syrian workers and prosperity for all. While the Compact serves as a bargaining chip between Jordan and its donors, especially the European Union, against the backdrop of specific state interests, it nonetheless significantly changes the actual status of Syrian refugees, endowing them with the hybrid status of "refugee-migrant workers".

In its pursuit of formalizing 200,000 Syrian workers, Jordan has implemented various incentive measures since 2016: almost free work permits (automatically renewed), while their annual cost amounts to several hundred Jordanian dinars for migrant workers of other nationalities (depending on the sectors); the right to change employers at will in the agriculture and construction sectors during the year and across sectors, privileges not available to other migrant workers.<sup>17</sup> However, the promises of the Compact have not yet been fulfilled or have only been partially realized. The number of work permits issued annually to Syrian workers (all categories combined) varied between 37,000 and 47,000 between 2016 and 2019, reaching about 62,000 in 2020 and 2021. This falls well short of the 200,000 envisaged by the Jordan Compact.<sup>18</sup> Two primary reasons are given for Syrian refugees' limited interest in formalizing their status: first, the low number of formal jobs available; second, restrictions on their freedom of movement, especially the fact that Syrian refugees are not allowed to obtain a driver's license (unless obtaining entrepreneur status, requiring a minimum deposit of 50,000 Jordanian dinars). The fear of losing entitlements to cash assistance provided by the UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) is another inhibiting factor.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Government of Jordan. 7/2/2016. *The Jordan Compact: A New Holistic Approach between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the International Community to deal with the Syrian Refugee Crisis*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/jordan-compact-new-holistic-approach-between-hashemite-kingdom-jordan-and>

<sup>17</sup> Work permits are also issued to Syrian workers engaged in temporary 'cash-for-work' projects (up to 3 months); Stave, S.E. et al. (September 2021). *Impact of work permits on decent work for Syrians in Jordan*. Fafo/ILO. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_820822.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_820822.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Idem. Cf. Al Hussein, J. (juin 2022). *Vulnérabilité et intégration en Jordanie: les réfugiés syriens dans leur environnement local*. *Rapports Techniques*. No.67.

<sup>19</sup> Al Hussein, J. (2022). *Idem*.

Another source of disappointment for Jordan is the relatively low enthusiasm among Syrians for work in the industrial sector (around 11% of work permits in 2019-2020<sup>20</sup>). In this regard, Jordanian officials have consistently lamented inheriting "unfortunately, peasants and farmers from southern Syria," as the Syrian working class from northern Syria had mostly sought refuge in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, international support for Jordan's industrial development, particularly in the form of new international investments and the establishment of international firms attracted by eased conditions for exporting to EU countries, has not materialized.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2. Economic Integration in Lebanon:

In Lebanon, Syrians are sometimes seen as competition, and at other times as an opportunity for the labor market. However, the Lebanese individuals interviewed fear the replacement of the workforce in certain sectors (such as health, catering, and industry) by Syrians. They also express concerns about unfair competition in trade and about Syrian-owned artisanal businesses that do not pay taxes. In the context of the end of the demographic transition in Lebanon and a shortage of labor, entrepreneurs in the fields of industry and agriculture, which traditionally rely on Syrian labor, view Syrians as an opportunity, a necessary presence.

There is an essentialization of Syrian labor, perceived as necessary and irreplaceable by Lebanese labor. The idea that Lebanese people cannot or do not want to work is quite common in the discourse of the entrepreneurs or landowners interviewed.

In Lebanon, the type of relationships maintained before the Syrian crisis plays a role in how Syrians are perceived by the Lebanese. Those residing in border areas describe very good, friendly, and sometimes familial, relationships with Syrians, which moderate their stance on the need to send Syrians back to Syria. On the other hand, respondents who were negatively affected by the Syrian occupation before 2005 hold a different view. For instance, an ex-combatant of the Lebanese Forces considers Syrians as dangerous criminals who must be sent back.

## 4. Syrian Refugees as Future Voluntary Repatriates?

Since the aspirations of the Compact have not materialized, the official representation of Syrian refugees in Jordan has once again evolved since 2018/2019, framed in terms of a risk of destabilization amid a backdrop of widespread social and economic crisis. Since 2010, the unemployment rate within the Jordanian population has steadily increased, from 12.5% in 2010

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<sup>20</sup> Stave, S.E. et al. (September 2021). *op.cit.*, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a Secretary-General of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, May 2018

<sup>22</sup> As acknowledged by the EU representative in the "EU-Jordan rules of origin scheme is beneficial but yet to reach full potential stakeholders". The Jordan Times, December 9, 2019. The number of firms exporting to EU countries under the facilitated export regime (with 15% Syrian labor) amounted to 6 in March 2023, while Jordan was expecting dozens. Interview with MOPIC representative

to 19.6% in 2019, and, following the Covid-19 pandemic, to 22.6% in 2022. The proportion of Jordanians affected by poverty has also risen, from 14.4% in 2010 to 15.7% in 2018.<sup>23</sup> Despite the material conditions of registered Syrian refugees improving since 2011, they still, on average, find themselves in precarious situations: the unemployment rate approaches that of Jordanians (25% in 2019 compared to 61% in 2015), but due to the often informal nature of their employment, which is poorly paid, the poverty rate remains very high: 78% in 2019 compared to 96% in 2015.<sup>24</sup>

Although Jordan continues to affirm its "moral commitment" to the short and long-term needs of refugees, despite costs that exceed its absorption capacity,<sup>25</sup> the touted return of refugees to Syria has gained prominence in the discourse of the Jordanian state and leadership since early 2023. This is a consequence of both the economic and social crisis and the anticipated reduction in financial assistance to the most vulnerable Syrian refugees following the dispersion of financial resources from donors due to the war in Ukraine (since February 2022) and the earthquake in Turkey and Syria (February 2023).<sup>26</sup> The discussion of refugees returning has been facilitated by Syria's reintroduction to the Arab League in May 2023. It was first officially mentioned in the context of normalizing the situation in Syria and resolving disputes with its neighbors, including Jordan. During a meeting held in Amman in May 2023, the foreign ministers of Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq aimed to gradually address regional issues. The "voluntary and safe return of refugees" was identified as a paramount objective, with the implementation details to be coordinated between Syria, host states, and the United Nations.<sup>27</sup>

This promotion of refugee repatriation has been supported by numerous statements from members of the political class, starting with the Minister of Interior, who declared in July 2023 that "integrating refugees is not the best option."<sup>28</sup> Several economists have also emphasized that the return of refugees to their homes would have beneficial consequences for Jordan—a viewpoint widely disseminated in the local press.<sup>29</sup> In support of this perspective, some politicians, such as former minister and mayor of Amman, Mamdouh Abbadi, have cited the burden placed by Syrian refugees on Jordan, especially concerning access to the country's scarce water resources; in August 2023, Abbadi called for the rapid, including forced, return of refugees to Syria, a country he believes has fully regained stability.<sup>30</sup> Although this opinion has

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Department of Statistics (DoS). *Employment and Unemployment Survey* (<https://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/labourforce/employment-and-unemployment/> for 2010, 2019 and 2022) & UNICEF (2020). *Geographic Multidimensional Vulnerability Analysis – Jordan*. 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Tiltne A. and G. Tyldum (2019). *Syrian refugees in Jordan: better off than before but still vulnerable – a Brief*, Fafo; et Tiltne A., H. Zhang and J. Pedersen (2019), *The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps*, Fafo.

<sup>25</sup> JRP 2020-2022

<sup>26</sup> Euro Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor (Septembre 2022). *Jordan: Over 750,000 refugees risk facing a stifling humanitarian crisis due to lack of funding*, <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5333/Jordan:-Over-750,000-refugees-risk-facing-a-stifling-humanitarian-crisis-due-to-lack-of-funding>; Voir aussi: "Jordan foreign minister appeals against reducing aid for Syrian refugees", *The National News*, 6 June 2023; Al Hussein, Jalal (December 2022). *op.cit.*

<sup>27</sup> "Return of Syrian refugees 'top priority' in Arab summit: statement", *Al Monitor*, 1 May 2023.

<sup>28</sup> "Refugee response A collective responsibility of nations. Faraya". *Jordan Times*, 24 July 2023.

<sup>29</sup> « العربية للجامعة سوريا عودة قرار جراء الأردني الاقتصاد على كبيرة ايجابية آثار : اقتصاديون خبراء », *Al-R'ai*, 18 mai 2023.

<sup>30</sup> "Former Jordan Minister Calls for Deportation of Syrian Refugees". *The Syrian Observer*. 30 August 2023.

not been endorsed by the Jordanian government, it hints at a possible hardening of Jordan's position regarding the Syrian presence in the country.

In Lebanon, as the economic crisis continues to impact the financial resources of Lebanese households, the question of the Syrian presence in the country has become increasingly sensitive. No actor in the Lebanese political class supports their continued presence on the territory, and discourses converge on the disastrous economic situation in which Syrians become an interesting tool: through discriminatory discourse based on class affiliation, responsibility for the crisis is shifted onto Syrian refugees. Moreover, the regular perception survey conducted by UNDP and ARK Group<sup>31</sup> shows an increase compared to previous years in the number of respondents reporting negative inter-communal relations compared to previous years (21% in July 2018, 24% in April 2022, and 46% in March 2023). This survey covers the entire Lebanese territory and is disaggregated by district and governorate, although it does not provide qualitative data and thus does not explain the differences between regions.

The deepening of the financial crisis since 2019 has reinforced negative opinions regarding the Syrian presence, especially from an economic perspective. The return of Syrians becomes the solution to the ills afflicting Lebanon, and with their departure, it is claimed, the availability of resources for the Lebanese (bread, water, electricity, employment, etc.) would be improved.

## 5. International Aid

### 5.1. Weight and Perceptions of International Aid in Lebanon:

Since the beginning of the “Syrian crisis”, approximately US\$13 billion have been spent to address the identified needs of Syrians in Lebanon (food security, education, health, hygiene, housing, protection) through the UN agencies present in the country (mainly WFP, UNHCR, and UNICEF).<sup>32</sup>

The aid is distributed across various intervention areas. The sectors of food security and health are the main recipients of this aid (these sectors received US\$130 and US\$80 million respectively in 2022, compared to US\$14 million for the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector, and US\$27 million for the protection of women and children (CP & GBV).<sup>33</sup> According to the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), 1.5 million Syrians and 1.5 million vulnerable Lebanese received aid. It is essential to note that the aid received does not always go through the LCRP, and other types of ad hoc aid, or aid intended for the Lebanese population, are allocated through other channels.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiZGZhMDEzMjYtNzFmZC00YjU3LWE0Y2YtNTcyMmZhNjAyNTI1IiwidCI6ImIzZTVkYjVILT15NDQ0NDgzNy05OWY1LTc0ODhhY2U1NDMxOSIsImMiOiJh9>

<sup>32</sup> Source : [OCHA Financial Tracking Service \(FTS\)](#)

<sup>33</sup> Child protection and gender-based violence



International aid is perceived as a source of tension. Syrians receive aid that Lebanese respondents see as excessive or unfair, especially when the crisis affects the access to resources of a significant portion of the Lebanese population. At the local level, international aid appears crucial to making the Syrian presence acceptable. For example, the municipality of Bar Elias, like others in the Bekaa, has significantly benefited from the presence of international organizations that manage and organize the Syrian presence, delivering services also useful to the Lebanese (waste treatment, water distribution, etc.). By contrast, the discourse on international aid is entirely different in localities that have not received this aid (such as Tarchich or Fanar). Indeed, the absence of international organizations in these municipalities prevents them from taking advantage of humanitarian aid, which can serve to justify more vehement discourse about the ostensible injustice created by international aid.

## 5.2. Weight and Perceptions of International Aid in Jordan:

In Jordan, international financial aid consists mainly of contributions from the WFP for food needs (in the form of vouchers) and from UNHCR for other types of needs. Furthermore, social assistance projects (vocational training, informal education, etc.) until 2015/2016 primarily benefited refugees: 70% of beneficiaries were refugees, compared to the 30% directed towards vulnerable members of host communities. This distribution accorded with a protocol agreed upon by Jordan. Development assistance is coordinated by the Humanitarian Affairs Office of the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC-HRCU) following the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and the Accra Action Plan of 2008<sup>34</sup>. The JORISS database integrates all assistance programs from institutional donors, as well as registered NGOs in Jordan, including the Islamic charity from Gulf donors.<sup>35</sup>

The international assistance drawn by the presence of refugees through various channels has contributed to the development of road infrastructure, municipal services, and even job creation for Jordanians in areas with a high concentration of Syrians. In fact, all vocational training and employment projects funded by the international community since 2016 theoretically benefit over half, and up to two-thirds, of members of the most vulnerable host community.<sup>36</sup> Economists have demonstrated that the international assistance received by Jordan between 2012 and 2019, totaling US\$3.38 billion, was three times higher than that received between 2009 and 2012. The aid received for infrastructure in the most affected municipalities was 125% higher than that intended for refugees. Moreover, the economic slowdown is not

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<sup>34</sup><https://www.oecd.org/fr/cad/efficacite/declarationdeparissurlefficacitedelaide.htm#:~:text=La%20D%C3%A9claration%20de%20Paris%20sur%20l'efficacit%C3%A9%20de%20l'aide&text=Elle%20met%20en%20place%20une.des%20comptes%20pour%20leur%20engagements>. Cf. JRP 2018-2020 p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> In 2013, one-third of humanitarian assistance came from Gulf countries, amounting to US\$300 million out of \$900 million, including \$130 million through Jordanian Islamic charitable NGOs, cf Ababsa Muhsen 2014. The Jordan Hashemite Charity organization manages large warehouses through which in-kind aid must transit, but not all NGOs comply with this requirement.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with NGO Phoenix (October 1, 2023), which emphasizes the 'legitimate' opportunism of Jordan's 'rentier' discourse towards its donors. See also interviews with officials from the European Union Delegation in Amman between 2017-2023. Cf. Francis, Alexandra (September 21, 2015). *Jordan's Refugee Crisis*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

attributable to the Syrian presence but rather to poor strategic choices that have failed to reduce energy dependence or to strengthen the private sector.<sup>37</sup>

However, this situation does not prevent a sense of frustration among the Jordanian population, reinforced by the configuration of international aid that favors refugees, particularly in the field of financial assistance reserved for them which boosts their work income.<sup>38</sup> According to the survey conducted by UNHCR in June 2023, nearly 9 out of 10 respondents (89%) believe that Jordan has done more than is necessary for refugees, and almost two-thirds (61%) think that too much money has been allocated to refugees, especially according to respondents in Mafraq – where Syrian receive more aid than Jordanians.<sup>39</sup> This “excess” of aid for Syrian refugees is not solely the result of international organizations; many local organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood, have also leveraged their assistance to Syrian refugees to enhance their influence in the country, when aid to Syrians has become more like a business<sup>40</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

The representation of Syrians by the Lebanese has evolved since the Syrian crisis, especially since the 2019 crisis. This evolution, whose beginnings were identified in a report published in 2013 (Christophersen et al., FAFO report 2013), is explained notably by the history of this presence, whether related to family or professional relationships, or to the entry and occupation of the Syrian army in Lebanon from 1975 to 2005. It has been particularly affected by the Syrian conflict, which polarized the political forces involved. These forces then influenced various official positions and general opinion regarding the Syrian presence and the perceived risks it poses to Lebanon (demographic, security, economic). However, it is especially the deepening of the 2019 crisis that has acted to harden negative opinions toward Syrian refugees, particularly from an economic perspective. The return of Syrians now becomes the miracle solution to all the problems facing Lebanon, and it is claimed that their departure would improve the availability of resources for the Lebanese (bread, water, electricity, jobs).

However, considering the data collected for this report, positions among the Lebanese population regarding the Syrian presence are mixed. Whether due to proximity to the Syrian border, ties of family and friendship between the two peoples, or professional relationships and the availability of cheap Syrian labor for entrepreneurs, Syrians are sometimes seen to represent

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<sup>37</sup> Fallah, Belal, Istaiteyeh Rasha and Yusuf Mansur (2021). *Moving Beyond Humanitarian Assistance: Supporting Jordan As A Refugee-Hosting Country*, World Refugee & Migration Council Research Report;

<sup>38</sup> Interviews with municipal employees in Irbid and Sahab (Amman Governorate), August 2023. 'Let's take the Jordanians' point of view: rents went from 150 JD to 250 JD. That was difficult. The son of the country, he had no water, garbage everywhere. He was in competition with the Syrians. Not to mention that he had to wait in line for medical care because the Syrians needed medical attention. And at school, Jordanian children had fewer hours of classes because two shifts had to be created to accommodate the refugees. So, it wasn't easy at the beginning.' (Director of Planning, Irbid Municipality, August 2023).

<sup>39</sup> UNHCR (June 2023). *op.cit.* p.20.

<sup>40</sup> According to B.A.T., head of the UNRWA Center for the Disabled in the Zarqa camp, interview on September 5, 2023

an opportunity for Lebanon. On the other hand, the sectarian and cultural differences identified by some of the lower classes, having no interest in this presence, form the basis for a mass rejection of Syrians, deemed harmful to the country.

The study of representations and modes of inclusion of Syrian refugees in Jordan has identified two analytical frameworks: that of the state, on the one hand, and that of Jordanians as individuals or civil society organizations on the other. These two frameworks sometimes overlap, influencing each other, in highlighting the detrimental effects of the presence of Syrian refugees. However, they also diverge when popular perceptions incorporate claims of mismanagement against the state and its international partners in terms of both the economy and the Syrian refugee crisis. The representation of Syrian refugees by Jordanians is thus more nuanced.

The analysis of state representations and correlated modes of inclusion has highlighted the legal vulnerability of refugees who arrived in the country after the initial wave of Palestinian refugees who arrived in 1948 and were naturalized in 1954 according to the Jordanian Nationality Law – the only group with a principle right of residence, pending resolution through return to their homes or compensation according to relevant UN resolutions. While the entry into the territory of other categories of refugees fleeing violence and persecution in their countries is constitutionally guaranteed, based on a principle of hospitality rooted in Bedouin, Arab, and Islamic traditions, permanent residence, and the associated right to (formal) work are not guaranteed: non-Palestinian refugees are, in principle, “guests” whose residence can only be considered temporary (generally set at 6 months to 1 year). The absence of a permanent solution in the form of repatriation to the country of origin or resettlement in a third country, with financial and operational support from the international community, has transformed the temporariness of refugee life into a medium-to-long-term existence through annual extensions of their residence permits.

The lack of legislation specific to the inclusion of refugees in Jordan has rendered their access to public services and the job market dependent on the perceptions that authorities have of them – seen either in terms of positive contributions or collective threat to the political and socio-economic stability of the country. In the case of Syrian refugees, due to the magnitude of their massive influx between 2012 and 2014, and the political and economic instability of the regional context, the modalities of their integration constituted a major dilemma for the authorities. While the Jordanian authorities have been concerned to display to the international community the image of a model host country, their response to the Syrian refugee crisis has varied significantly.

The perceptions of the Syrian presence within the Jordanian population, including among individuals, municipalities, and civil society institutions, have only followed official representations disseminated by government institutions and the national press only to a certain extent. There is a common initial movement of unconditional welcome and spontaneous solidarity toward the “Syrian brothers”, followed by rejection due to the negative consequences their presence imposes on infrastructure, public services, and competition for jobs as their residence persists. However, unlike official representations, those emanating from the

Jordanian population unfold more subtly, not only in macro terms but also based on their personal experiences of coexistence, both positive and negative, with Syrians.

APPENDIX 1 – Executive Summary of the Study on Lebanon:  
Representations and inclusion models of Syrian refugees in Lebanon

*/ Elsa Maarawi*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY<sup>41</sup>

This report aims to understand the representations and inclusion models of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, as well as their evolution in both countries.

It primarily relies on documentary sources produced by researchers and think tanks, as well as a press review provided by the French Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon.

The fieldwork in Lebanon relied on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted in three Lebanese localities (Fanar, Bar Elias, and Tarchich). Along with discussions with political analysts and journalists working on the issue, these interviews constitute an informative yet non-representative sample of political and popular public opinions in Lebanon.

**I- Context of hosting Syrian refugees in Lebanon: A historical background**

- The influx of Syrian refugees follows the popular uprising in Syria in 2011, which led to the repression of the population by the Syrian regime, initially transforming the uprising into an internal conflict that then rapidly degenerated into a regional one (involving the Lebanese Hezbollah, Turkey, etc.), and finally developed into an international conflict characterized by European interventions and Russian involvement since 2015.
- This conflict has resulted in unprecedented population displacements in the region, both within Syria (approximately 13 million displaced) and in neighboring countries (approximately 5.6 million refugees). Initially, these displacements were deemed temporary, involving numerous back-and-forths, before becoming long-lasting with the entry of regional actors into the conflict.
- In Lebanon, the influx of Syrian refugees followed well-established migration routes characterized by pendular migrations related to job-seeking, work and economic activities, and governed by bilateral agreements and familial and tribal relationships on both sides of the border.
- Today, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Lebanon has listed approximately 800,000 Syrians in its registers, out of an estimated total of around 1.5 million refugees currently present on Lebanese territory. These figures are subject to interpretation, since the UNHCR stopped registering newcomers in 2015 (only newborns and minor family members are still officially added) at the request of the Lebanese government, while some political leaders commonly and roughly refer to the presence of 2 or even 3 million Syrians currently living in Lebanon.

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<sup>41</sup> Maarawi, Elsa, 2023, *Étude des modèles d'inclusion et des représentations des réfugiés syriens au Liban*, rapport Chaire de Recherche sur les Environnements Urbains au Proche-Orient, janvier, 2024, 29 p.

- The influx of refugees has led to a significant humanitarian response, with approximately US\$13 billion spent since 2011 as part of the coordinated United Nations response.
- Syrians registered with the UNHCR are mainly located in the Bekaa Valley (40%) and in the northern part of the country, with around 20% living in informal camps.

## **II- Three main hosting phases**

Three distinct phases can be identified in the hosting of Syrians on Lebanese soil. These phases can be retraced through the rhetoric of the Lebanese government and their subsequent policies and measures. However, the Lebanese public opinion varies among different social groups and their respective interests.

### ***Phase #1- The humanitarian effort (2011-2013)***

The first phase, from 2011 to 2013, was characterized by a humanitarian effort on Lebanon's part. There was, at the time, no clear stance on the refugee presence, other than the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in 2003 with the UNHCR, acknowledging Lebanon's non-recognition of refugee status on its soil. This seemingly neutral position facilitated a delicate balance among the various local political forces. This was partially due to their inability to reach a consensus on the events in Syria, since some supported the regime and its repression, while others supported the popular uprising. During this phase, Lebanese host communities along the borders opened their doors to Syrians, whether or not they were family members.

### ***Phase #2- The security phase: From spontaneous welcome to fear (2014-2018)***

The first phase quickly ended as the number of Syrians registered by the UNHCR increased from 18,000 to 800,000. This surge reflected a shift in the perception of Syrians' presence in Lebanon, from temporary displacement to a long-lasting one, as the prospect of returning to Syria became increasingly difficult due to armed conflicts around Homs, the Damascus region, and Aleppo. The entry of Hezbollah into the conflict and the presence of armed groups and Sunni fighters on both sides of the border marked the beginning of the second phase: the security phase. The representation of Syrians as those in need of assistance then came to be combined with fear over the potential for the conflict to spill over into Lebanese territory – a fear that was fueled by battles in Eرسال and Tripoli in 2014, as well as the involvement of various Lebanese jihadist groups in bombings in Beirut and Tripoli between 2012 and 2014. In 2016, Lebanon signed the "EU-Lebanon Compact" with the European Union, a cooperation plan involving humanitarian response aid, economic resilience, job creation, and measures aiming for the partial integration of Syrians in Lebanon, pending their return. Yet, this agreement failed, as Lebanon refused the integration of Syrians into Lebanese territory. During this phase,

Syrians were perceived as a security threat, leading many municipalities to implement curfews against Syrian nationals.

### ***Phase#3- The Social concerns amidst the severe economic crises (2019-today)***

In 2019, the uprising of the Lebanese population against the government, followed by the Covid-19 health crisis, relegated the Syrian issue to the background. However, it quickly resurfaced amid an unprecedented economic and social crisis. Syrians have come to attract increasing blame, perceived as beneficiaries of international aid, while the Lebanese struggle for their own subsistence. The issue of access to services and the pressure on the country's resources and infrastructure have come to be emphasized, underscoring discourse around the necessity for Syrians to return to their home country.

#### III- Representations that are influenced by the history and the construction of the State

Lebanese representations of Syrians in Lebanon are shaped by various factors. Firstly, the stance of political leaders revolves mainly around three issues: demographic, security, and humanitarian concerns. This stance varies based on different religious affiliations and according to their varying relationships with the Syrian regime. Secondly, factors such as the role played by Syria during the Lebanese Civil War, specific experiences of Syrian occupation, the geographical proximity to the border, confessional proximity with Syrians, employment of Syrian labor, personal experiences during the economic crisis, and perceptions of humanitarian aid all serve as criteria that influence perceptions of those interviewed regarding the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

#### Diverse Representations of Syrians by Lebanese Individuals:

- There is no homogeneous representation of Syrians among the Lebanese.
- Those representations depend on factors such as religion, region of residence, political affiliation, profession, and the relationships maintained with Syrians.

#### Labels for Syrians: Refugees, Displaced, Workers, Profiteers:

- The terminology used to describe Syrians varies based on regions and actors, linked to historical, political, and social factors.
- The term "refugee" is seldom used. While the government and humanitarian documents use "displaced", Sunni regions prefer "brothers", while areas critical of the Syrian presence use "aid profiteers", and regions traditionally hosting Syrian labor call them "workers". In all cases, this population is viewed as problematic for Lebanon.

#### Syrian Women, Children, and Demographic Change:

- The presence of Syrian women and their children is relatively new, since prior to 2011, Syrian workers were mostly men. Their arrival is seen as a demographic invasion by some.

- Women and children are often supported by aid and targeted by humanitarian programs, whether through financial aid or resettlement (e.g. prioritizing single women with children for third-country resettlement).

#### Syrian Labor as useful without their families:

- Useful for some while being perceived as market competitors for others in the labor market, Syrian refugees settled in Lebanon since 2011 are perceived as an excessive and overwhelming burden.
- Discourses often express nostalgia for a time when Syrians would come to work and then return home, leaving their families in Syria. Concerns are raised about demographic threats, especially in certain Christian regions, and complaints surface about unfair competition in specific sectors of craftsmanship and industry.

#### Role of Fragmented Humanitarian Aid, Detached from National Reality:

- Criticism of the humanitarian response is unanimous, considered inadequate or unfair.
- There is a lack of understanding of the aid operations due to a perceived lack of transparency in aid allocation, with the latter regarded as disconnected from social realities and on-the-ground conditions.

#### Impasse of the Syrian Situation Leaving Lebanon Alone in Seeking Solutions:

- Legal pathways for resettlement are limited, and the situation in Syria prevents mass returns.
- This impasse hinders the development of lasting solutions for Syrians and ensuring accommodation in Lebanese territory.
- A general reluctance to shoulder responsibility for the presence is expressed, especially regarding the country's current economic and financial challenges.

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APPENDIX 2 – Executive Summary of the Study on Jordan:  
Representations and inclusion models of Syrian refugees in Jordan  
*/ Jalal Al Hussein & Myriam Ababsa*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY<sup>42</sup>

This study focuses on the representations held by Jordanian authorities and society regarding Syrian refugees since their arrival in Jordan in 2011.

Its objective is to discern from various perspectives the political and socio-economic implications of these representations, as well as their evolving nature.

The study is divided into two parts. The first part scrutinizes the state-driven representations of Syrian refugees, elucidating their legal status, social and economic rights, and the narrative constructed by authorities through public discourse and the national press. The subsequent part focuses on representations of Syrian refugees within the Jordanian population, particularly from members of civil society, as conveyed through semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors, opinion surveys, and testimonials from assistance organizations that have observed the changing dynamics between Syrian refugees and their host communities. This analysis aims to underscore the points of convergence and divergence between state-driven representations and those within Jordanian society at large, along with their respective impacts.

### **I- State-Driven Representations and Practices**

Jordanian legislation on refugees advocates for the hosting and the quasi-permanent residency rights for political refugees who flee their country due to "their political principles or the defense of freedom" (pending a permanent solution, notably through repatriation to the country of origin or resettlement in a third country).

In practice, only Palestinian refugees and displaced Palestinians from 1948 and 1967 have enjoyed this status. Other national groups have been regarded merely as "guests" or "temporary visitors", with their right to residency as asylum seekers theoretically ensured by the 1973 Residence and Foreigners Law.

This law stipulates that asylum seekers and refugees (recognized as such by foreign entities such as the UNHCR) are exempt from the obligation to hold valid identity papers upon entry into the territory by virtue of "humanitarian courtesy".

Additionally, a protocol of agreements concluded between Jordan and the UNHCR in 1998 assigns the responsibility for determining refugee status to the latter for a period of 6 months.

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<sup>42</sup> Al Hussein, Jalal et Myriam Ababsa, 2023, *Étude des modèles d'inclusion et des représentations des réfugiés syriens en Jordanie*, Chaire de Recherche sur les Environnements Urbains au Proche-Orient, janvier, 2024, 41 p.

This clause has been consistently renewed in most cases due to the lack of a lasting solution. The UNHCR card serves as one of the documents justifying (temporary) residence in Jordan.

Jordan is not, however, a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and apart from certain fundamental rights, such as the right to access legal remedies and receive legal assistance, Jordanian legislation does not specify the modalities for accessing public services, such as education and healthcare, for most refugees residing outside camps (over 80% of them). Generally, while access to primary education in Jordanian public schools has been allowed, the cost of primary healthcare has varied between free-of-charge and the highest cost imposed on international expatriates. Furthermore, access to the right to work is, in principle, beyond the reach of asylum seekers/refugees, as they must renounce their registration with the UNHCR and its services (legal protection, financial assistance, and resettlement processes in a third country) upon obtaining formal employment through a Jordanian employer (sponsor or *Kafil*).

In practice, however, Jordan has managed its various national refugee groups on a case-by-case basis, depending on the authorities' perceptions of their impact on the country's political and socio-economic stability and their subsequent representations.

This is particularly evident in the case of Syrian refugees who arrived *en masse* between 2011 and 2014, constituting approximately 90% of all refugees registered by the UNHCR as of August 2023.

State representations of Syrian refugees have evolved since 2011, influenced by various economic, social, and political/security factors. While reflecting the concerns of Jordanian leaders regarding the negative repercussions of the influx of these refugees on Jordanian society, these representations have also served as a strategic lever to explain their reception policies and mobilize financial and operational assistance from the international community in support of what is deemed essential management of the Syrian refugee crisis and, beyond that, the stability of the country. Hence, we identified five registers of state representation of Syrian refugees, emerging and coexisting at different phases since 2011/2012, with the Jordanian State highlighting one or another of these registers according to its varying interests.

### ***Register #1 - Syrian refugees as primary beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance***

One register frames Syrian refugees as primary beneficiaries of the humanitarian assistance generously provided by the Jordanian government and its international partners, including the UNHCR and WFP, along with numerous international non-governmental organizations. Due to their demographic prevalence compared to other refugee groups, Syrian refugees (and subsequently their host communities) have been the focal point of national and international humanitarian aid. Illustrative of this focus is the establishment of three refugee camps between 2012 and 2014 (more than 40 years after the "emergency" camps set up by Jordanian authorities to accommodate the most deprived Palestinian displaced persons from 1967-1968). Notably, the Zaatari camp, with its 81,000 residents entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance, constitutes the fourth-largest population center in the country.

### ***Register #2- Syrian refugees as obstacles to Jordan's development***

A second register, emerging as early as the first year of the Syrian exile in 2012, portrays Syrian refugees as obstacles to Jordan's development. This negative representation stems from the strain caused by the massive presence of Syrian refugees on the physical and social infrastructure of northern Jordan, as well as on public finances. This negative portrayal has persisted due to international contributions having been deemed insufficient in meeting the needs of refugees and their host communities. However, this partial and biased observation overlooks the positive contributions of Syrian refugees to the Jordanian economy as consumers, skilled workers, and dynamic entrepreneurs, from which certain cities like Mafraq have greatly benefited.

### ***Register #3- Syrian refugees as potential destabilizing agents for Jordanian security***

A third register, with a security focus, depicts Syrian refugees as potential destabilizing agents. Initially fueled by the fear that agents loyal to the Damascus regime and later Salafist/Jihadist groups might infiltrate refugee ranks, this representation gained further credence in 2015 and 2016 following jihadist attacks at the Jordan-Syria border. This led to campaigns of re-registration of refugees and deportation to Syria of those suspected of affiliation with such groups (or, at least, their "forced relocation" to a section of the Azraq camp).

### ***Register #4- Syrian refugees as a developmental asset for Jordan***

A fourth developmentalist register, in contrast, promotes refugees as a developmental asset for Jordan. This representation, seemingly contradicting previous depictions, underlies the agreement (the Compact) between Jordan and its major donors in 2016. Informed by the awareness among Jordanian leaders that the presence of Syrian refugees is likely to endure and increasingly strain public finances and public services, the Compact aims to transform the Syrian refugee crisis into a "development opportunity" by formalizing around 200,000 Syrian workers. The objective is not merely to maximize their direct contribution to the Jordanian economy but to ensure, in return, substantial economic aid (investments, favorable loans, and export promotion) from donors, including the European Union, grappling with its "migration crisis" since 2015 and eager to curb Syrian migration to Europe. However, the Compact has not yet achieved its goals: the annual distribution of work permits to Syrian workers has never reached its target of 200,000 formal jobs (instead, 62,000 have been reached at maximum in 2020 and 2021), and international investments supporting Jordan's development are still awaited.

### ***Register #5- Syrian refugees as a burden hinting at a voluntary return back home***

Finally, a fifth register revisits, after the relative failure of the Compact, the representation of refugees as a social and economic burden but hints at a possible voluntary return to their homes in Syria. This portrayal of Syrian refugees, or at least the most vulnerable among them, as future voluntary returnees emerged as early as 2020, influenced by the deterioration of the social and economic situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, the continuous decline in international contributions for addressing the Syrian refugee crisis, and the ongoing political and security stabilization process in Syria, solidified in May 2023 with Syria's reinstatement within the Arab League.

## **II- Representations and Practices of Jordanian Civil Society**

Jordanians' narratives and representations regarding the presence of Syrian refugees have aligned with certain registers that are mainly influenced by various impacts on their daily lives. While some registers mirror state representations, particularly concerning the adverse effects of the refugees' arrival on public services, they encompass a broader range of representations. This includes a gendered dimension related to the behaviors of Syrian families and women, varying across regions and depending on the governorate's absorption capacities. Additionally, although popular and official representations influenced each other during the early years of the Syrian refugees' presence, awareness within host communities that their problems stem not from the refugees themselves but primarily from the Jordanian state and its international partners' mismanagement of the economy and migration flows has tended to improve popular perceptions and representations of Syrian refugees since 2015.

Thus, we can identify two major phases in the evolution of popular representations of Syrian refugees since their arrival in Jordan.

### ***Phase #1- From the spontaneous welcome to rejection (2011-2015)***

The first phase (2011-2014/15) witnessed northern Jordanian communities and their local institutions spontaneously welcoming the "Syrian brothers and sisters", often bound by ancestral tribal/familial and commercial relationships, during the initial months of their presence. This preceded a rise in feelings of hostility and rejection due to the competition emerging between Jordanians and Syrians in various sectors such as housing, employment, and access to water. Syrians were also suspected of being potential terrorists, in parallel with local authorities' concerns. They were criticized for their marital practices, the perceived "liberal" behavior of their women, and the fact that they received international financial and social assistance to which local communities were deemed less entitled. These positions translated into negative representations that tended to replace the initial portrayals of the Syrians as "brothers and sisters in need": "terrorists", "exploiters of the assistance system", "pimps", "job

thieves", or, "responsible" for the rise in crime and inflation affecting the country (this latter label was similarly applied to Iraqi refugees who arrived in large numbers in 2006-2007). Intercommunity tensions were more pronounced in the relatively underdeveloped governorates of the north and in urban areas where Syrian refugees were over-concentrated, such as Mafraq, compared to governorates with greater absorption capacities like Amman or Zarqa.

### ***Phase #2- Positive perceptions and empathy mixed with the hope for voluntarily return***

By the end of 2014, however, a shift occurred in the positions of Jordanian host communities towards Syrian refugees, resulting from the gradual closure of the Jordan-Syria borders from 2014, better consideration of their needs since 2016, and an intercommunity socialization process facilitated by daily neighborhood relations. This shift was reinforced, as confirmed by our interviews with representatives of Jordanian civil society, by the growing awareness that the socio-economic difficulties faced by both communities, especially following the Covid-19 episode, were primarily due to the poor governance of the Jordanian state and its international partners.

This positive evolution, reflected in popular representations recognizing the professional abilities of Syrians and the precariousness of their living conditions due to reduced international contributions, was confirmed nationwide through surveys conducted among Jordanians by international assistance organizations from 2016. Regular surveys by the UNHCR from 2020 further supported this trend. Not only did Jordanians again express high levels of empathy towards their Syrian counterparts, but many also claimed to have voluntarily offered assistance. However, Jordanian concerns regarding the Syrian presence did not disappear entirely. As indicated by the latest UNHCR survey, as of June 2023 competition for housing and employment remains the top concern for surveyed Jordanians, ahead of access to medical and educational services and clean water. More generally, there is consensus among those surveyed that there are too many refugees in Jordan, and that the country has done more than is necessary for them.

Consequently, the way Jordanians express themselves about the future of Syrian refugees is ambiguous. While most of them (78%) currently advocate for the integration of Syrian refugees, especially among the youth, a smaller majority (at 53%) support the refugees' imminent return to their homes, aligning with the new directions of the Jordanian state. However, few believe such repatriation is feasible in the short term. This is a crucial consideration as donors still tend to reduce their financial and technical contributions for managing the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan.

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