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# The Challenging Protection of Syrian Refugees and the National Security Imperative in Jordan

*Victoire d'Humieres*

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## **Abstract**

Human security, as a people-centered concept, encompasses a broad range of conditions which threaten survival, livelihood and dignity. Syrian refugees that settled in Jordan but also host communities are vulnerable as they lack access to basic goods and services. Tensions are rising at the local level. The research presented in this article aims at discussing Jordan's response to displacement from Syria from a community-based approach as well as its consequences for the national security and stability of the state. It looks at Jordan's utilitarian approach and how human security of the Syrian refugees is a leitmotiv in Jordan's foreign policy, a powerful argument in its relations with external powers, especially regarding development aid and military cooperation.

*Keywords:* Human Security, National Security, Syrian Refugee Crisis, Development Aid, Protracted Refugee Situations

## **Introduction**

Seven years after the uprising started in Syria, the country has been devastated by the hostilities, and over 5.3 million Syrians have been forced to flee abroad (UNCHR 2017). More than 600,000 sought refuge in Jordan, making the country the second largest host of Syrian refugees relative to the size of its population (UNCHR 2017). For mainly geographic reasons, the country had previously been exposed to flow of refugees. Indeed, Palestinians, Iraqis and now Syrians have found in the country "a relative oasis of stability in the troubled region" (Barakat and Leber 2014: 1).

The influx of refugees across Jordan's northern border has strained its already precarious economy and overburdened budget. The country is externally oriented due to its limited sources of internal revenue and resource impoverishment and as such is highly vulnerable to external shocks. Despite the pressing challenges raised by the International Monetary Fund

on the deteriorated conditions of the labour market or the increased trade deficit, King Abdullah II has made clear that for now the "first and foremost priority will continue to be the protection of (the country's) security" (Jordan Times 2016). Yet, what is striking in Jordan is that both Jordan's security and its prosperity have been relying "heavily on the interests of external political players since the British first conceived its borders in 1921" (Mansur 2014: 1).

This article discusses Jordan's response to displacement from Syria from a community-based approach. It argues that (1) human security of both Syrian refugees and host communities is at risk. (2) The government has been using the challenges as a *leitmotiv* of its foreign policy. However, (3) survey data gathered by several international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) highlights that the lack of human security could have consequences for the national security and long-term stability of the state. Because it would go beyond the scope of this article to analyse whether national security policies have been taken at the expense of socio-economic policies, it rather analyses how the country is coping internally with the crisis and how it impacts on its external relations.

The methodology put forth combines a review of the literature and data presented therein that look at the perception of Syrian refugees as well as host communities in Jordan. It builds on the extensive studies and surveys conducted mainly by two INGOs, REACH and OXFAM, in Zaatari Camp, Zarqa and Balqa Governorates, the city of Mafraq, East Amman and the Jordan Valley, where the concentration of Syrian refugees is the highest.

## **Definition of Concepts**

The notion of 'security' in international affairs is often associated with the state security model, the "security of territory from external aggression, or as protection of national interests" (UNDP 1994: 21). In line with the realist approach, states would be central prevailing actors in international politics driven by their desire for power and hence the need to ensure security for their self-preservation. Although still dominant, the model has been complemented in the 1990s by a new approach put forth in the 1994 Human Development Report (UNDP 1994).

According to the previously mentioned report, social and economic insecurity would threaten international stability (Timothy 2004). Two paradigms shape the notion of human security, namely "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" (UNDP 1994: 24). This new approach put into place a system that intends to "complement state security, enhance human rights and strengthen human development" (UN 2003: 11). Rather than considering security from the sole perspective of the State, human security strives in being a people-centered concept, focusing on the individual. The underlying justification for this approach is that this "human focus" is the

best guarantee for long-term stability, prosperity and security (Liotta 2003). A state insecure politically, environmentally, or internationally cannot guarantee human security of its population (Mojonnier 2013).

Human security places the individual at the 'centre of analysis'. In this regard, this article focuses on the perceived vulnerabilities by Jordanian citizens as well as registered refugees in Jordan. Historically, security was approached in terms of threats to state sovereignty and territory and often clearly visible or commonly acknowledged (Thomas and Tow 2002). 'Vulnerabilities' are less indefinable and frequently linked to complex issues. Unlike a threat it is not openly perceived or understood. It underscores the use of the individual as the key unit and the multi-sectoral understanding of insecurities associated with a human security approach. It is also worth noting the influence that might play perception in generating a subjective threat hence creating vulnerability. The article analyses perception of communities on existing vulnerabilities and tensions within Jordan to review how the country has yet to grasp that "human security complements state security, strengthens human development and enhances human rights" (UN 2003: 11).

### **Syrian Refugees' and Jordanian Citizens' Vulnerabilities**

From 2011 onwards Syrian refugees have crossed the border to settle mainly in the northern part of Jordan. 20 percent of them live in the two main camps that are Zaatari and Azraq. Assessments carried out in the camps reveal the various challenges perceived by registered Syrian refugee respondents regarding their human security. However, the focus on the 80 percent living among the urban population is even more explicit for the spatial proximity highlights how needs increase perceived tensions between host and refugee communities (UNHCR 2017).

Following its establishment in 2012, Zaatari Camp has become emblematic of the displacement of Syrians across the Middle East. The camp grew from a small collection of tents into an urban settlement. As of September 2017, 80,146 Syrian refugees were registered in the camp, 78 percent of which are women and children (UNHCR 2017). Social protection and humanitarian assistance programmes aimed at supporting refugees are almost all implemented by international organisations and INGOs (Röth et al. 2017). To name only a few, the World Food Programme is currently offering the voucher programme to 95,000 beneficiaries in refugee camps; the Norwegian Refugee Council contributes to shelter support and infrastructure maintenance, basic items (cash and vouchers) and cash-for-work scheme (UNHCR & UNDP 2016).

A study conducted by OXFAM in the Zaatari Camp district 6, 7 and 8 assessed the needs of Syrian from their own perspective. The data collected allowed the INGO to identify challenges and gaps in aid assistance efforts. It

also provides relevant information on vulnerabilities for the present analysis (Serrato 2014).

Key findings are the following: The main challenge that threatens the living conditions of Syrian refugees is access to health services. Among the factors raised by the respondents are the long distance to facilities within the camp, the inconsistent quality of services including staff behaviour towards refugees, and the limited capacity to address both the number of patients and their medical conditions. Consequently, many refugees report going directly to private clinics due to negative first-hand experience or rumours. Regarding non-food items and food distributions, respondents regret the extended waiting periods, security concerns associated with crowds or harassment and the lack of sufficient food. They associate barriers to water and sanitation communal facilities with security and privacy concerns. 22,000 school-aged children are enrolled in one of the 29 schools. In those schools, children or their parents report to OXFAM fears of bullying or harassment. Accordingly, four out of the seven categories of threats identified by the United Nations Development Programme 1994 report (economic, food, health and personal) are foremost mentioned as perceived vulnerabilities by the Syrian respondents.

The situation outside of camps has deteriorated for Syrian refugees (UNHCR-UNDP). According to data from the *Vulnerability Assessment Framework*, 93 percent of Syrian refugees out of camps are living below the poverty line (ibid.). Refugees must go through the official registration processes to have access to employment opportunities. Registration - with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - is one of the greatest challenges for refugees (Röth et. al. 2017). Furthermore, to obtain a work permit, Syrian refugees must go through what has been described as a "work permit maze". A total of 8 mandatory steps must be taken to obtain the document, and 5 steps shall be renewed every year. As of 7 December 2016, 34,467 work permits have been issued to Syrian refugees. It accounts for only 1 percent of refugee households visited by the UNHCR.

The claims made by Syrian refugees within host communities parallel those within Zaatari camp (Serrato 2014). Moreover, the overall provision of services is not as coordinated as in the camp. Transparency and quality standards are described by Syrian in urban areas as weak and coordination is difficult to ensure. Amongst the 48 percent OXFAM respondents that felt there were barriers to services, distance to service locations was the most frequently cited. Regarding medical services the problems mentioned are similar including distances to larger public hospitals and the inconsistent quality of service. Although the opening of a second school shift to accommodate more students has addressed some of the needs of children in urban-based communities, for many, distance is still a burden. Numerous allegations ranging from profiteering to potential female exploitation were also raised, with regards to food voucher distribution centres. Furthermore,

36 percent of survey respondents indicated they have concerns for their housing situation.

Gaps in assistance delivery and protection identified above, whether in Zaatari camp or within urban areas, reveals multifaceted vulnerabilities affecting Syrian refugees, highlighting the extent to which their human security is at risk. Vulnerabilities and tensions are two notions that build on one another. As part of their ongoing *Jordan Social Cohesion in Host Communities Programme*, the NGO Generation for Peace assessed forms of local conflicts especially looking at what differences may exist between Jordanian and Syrian perspectives on conflict between the two sides. Tension can be seen as a variable, rising as vulnerabilities by two communities are perceived as rival and exclusive, meaning that the lack of access to certain goods is seen as been confiscated by another party.

In relationships and interactions between Syrians and Jordanians, the survey shows that protection and material support in Jordan is deeply linked to concepts such as hospitality or rights. According to the Generations For Peace (GFP) Institute Research report, 40.1 percent of Jordanian respondents and 37.5 percent of Syrian participants describe Syrian refugees as “guests” in Jordan. Some Syrians expressed frustration that they have not received the same level of hospitality in Jordan that they could have shown in Syria.

The NGO REACH started a project in 2013 to “help shed light on the tensions that have emerged as a result of the influx of Syrian refugees into Jordanian communities” (REACH 2013: 2). The findings suggest that key drivers of tensions are related to competition for employment, access to housing and challenges in accessing education. A further assessment carried out by REACH in 2014 to “provide an in-depth understanding of the key drivers of host community tensions” in northern Jordan found that livelihoods and employment are the major sources of tension (REACH 2014: 1). Consequently, social cohesion appears to have deteriorated as competition over employment is fierce. Syrians are often blamed for having contributed to a general rise in unemployment rates. A report by the International Labour Organization reveals that 85 percent of Jordanian workers believe that Syrians should not be allowed to enter Jordan freely, and 65 percent believe that all Syrians should live within refugee camps (Stave and Hillesund 2015).

Moreover, the GFP reports that, in Amman Governorate, tensions are widely present over concerns that some groups or families may be receiving more than their fair share of aid. 84 percent of Jordanians believe Syrians are unfairly supported financially (Stave and Hillesund 2015). Jordanian respondents often feel that their situation is disadvantageous, since Syrian refugees can rely on aid and humanitarian assistance from international organisations and NGOs. Additionally, further assessments carried out in 2014 by REACH on housing and on education reveal that access to those services caused community tensions.

The accumulation of perceived vulnerabilities by both Syrian refugees and Jordan host communities is a source of tension that might have incidence in the long term in the stability of those communities. As vulnerabilities increase, a threshold could easily be reached that would lead to transforming tensions into a potential security threat.

Foremost, it should be noted that Jordan has no legal obligation per se to ensure human security of refugees. Although present in many UN reports, human security is not defined in international law. It still provides a useful complement to the legally based concept of refugee protection. However, Jordan has not signed the 1951 Geneva Convention, and regards Syrian refugees as 'guests', a category with no legal meaning (Stave and Hillesund 2015). The Kingdom receives Syrian refugees within the framework of its Law of Residency and Foreigners Affairs. Through the registration process, refugees can receive temporary protection from UNHCR under the framework of a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1998 with the Jordanian Ministry of Interior.

### **The Challenges as a *leitmotiv* of Jordan's Foreign Policy**

The growing influx of Syrians crossing the border has rapidly increased and forced the government to open the Zaatari refugee camp and later Azraq and the Emirati Jordan Camp. Only through the 'bailout system' can Syrian registered refugees leave the camps. Such system requires to have a Jordan citizen to act as guarantor (Seeley 2013). Exploitation of refugees is worrying. In their desperation, many have to leave the camps by paying 'middlemen' around \$500 to arrange to be 'bailed out' by Jordanian citizens unknown to them. Moreover, Jordan has consistently made bailout papers very hard to obtain (Achilli 2015). Policies implemented by the government have raised concern regarding the protection of Syrian refugees in Jordan. Evictions, refugee deportations to camps, and even *refoulement* to Syria are often reported by the Jordan Times.

The Brookings Institution describes the country as being "on the edge" (Barakat and Leber 2015: 1). It states that Jordan has developed a "strategy focused entirely on national security" (Barakat and Leber 2015: 1). Rather than being encompassed through a set of policies, human security of Syrian refugees is a *leitmotiv* in Jordan's foreign policy, a powerful argument in its relations with external powers. Encampment policies illustrate how Jordan is using the crisis as leverage to promote its own interests. The country has "strategically used encampment to raise the profile of, and funds for, Syrian refugees on its territory" (Turner 2015: 4). This strategy is not new. "Throughout the kingdom's history, it has adroitly leveraged refugee populations to obtain greater political and economic support from patron nations" (Francis 2015: 5). International support is vital for the survival of

the country, especially regarding development aid and military cooperation. (Sharp 2017)

Jordan has maintained its pro-West strategic orientation. The country's most valuable exports are its regional security and stability (Barakat and Leber 2015). The Kingdom serves as a key base for regional humanitarian and development aid and remains a key military ally for Western states. The Council of Foreign Relations states that the United States has "a strong interest in helping Amman manage potentially destabilizing change", while it has at the same time "humanitarian and other political interests in Jordan". Jordan has been, since its creation, and because of its history of hosting refugees "lobbying for aid by constantly selling itself as an island of stability in a troubled region, a security bulwark against violent extremism, or a model reformer (both politically and economically) in an authoritarian neighbourhood" (Barakat and Leber 2015: 1).

The country has relied on foreign assistance and especially on official development assistance (ODA) to ensure its economic stability. "Jordan is a country accustomed to negotiating its survival through foreign aid" (Francis 2015: 5). Between 2012 and 2015, Jordan has received international aid contributing to an increase in GDP growth. As the biggest donor, the US has provided economic aid to Jordan both as cash transfer to its government and for USAID programmes in Jordan. From 1951 through 2015, total US aid amounted to approximately \$15.83 billion. OECD data from 2014-2015 highlights that humanitarian aid accounted in 2014-2015 for 30 percent of the funds received, while other social infrastructures and programme assistance make for, respectively 30 percent and 22 percent of the ODA. In third position, behind the United Arab Emirates, the European Commission and EU Member States has contributed financially to Jordan's development. Since the beginning of the crisis, the EU has channelled more than 428 million euros to Jordan through humanitarian, development, and budget support programmes.

In line with its national security priority, the Kingdom has also been relying on foreign partners to avoid regional spillovers that might threaten its security. As the conflict amplified, cooperation between Jordan and Saudi Arabia increased, and Jordan strengthened its military and intelligence ties with the United States and Israel. Despite being labelled by the public as "not Jordan's fight", the country's involvement in the Global Coalition against ISIS is another illustration of the strong ties with Western allies

Western powers count on the humanitarian and development aid assistance to make Jordan a key ally in the region. As stated by the US Congressional Report, "US. foreign assistance supports the continued (...) stability of the Kingdom of Jordan" (Sharp 2017: 1). In counterpart for the foreign humanitarian assistance and aid it receives, Jordan allowed, since the 2003 Iraq invasion, the United States to station troops and anti-aircraft guns on its territory. French and German air bases are stationed in the country, as part of the Global Coalition against ISIS.



Through a utilitarian lens, the Kingdom has managed to use the same perceived vulnerabilities highlighted by Syrians to ensure its economic survival and for the benefit of the one strategy that has been clearly set, the national security. Undoubtedly the Syrian refugee crisis has burdened Jordan's fragile economy. In its last 2015 outlook, the RAND Corporation stated that "the cornerstone of Jordanian internal stability is Jordan's close and continuing relationships with its external allies" (Connable 2015: 34). Yet it also depends on how the Kingdom intends to address macro-economic challenges that encompass human security of its citizens and the – likely protracted – Syrian refugees.

### **A Crisis of Governance that Could Threaten the Stability of the State**

The influx of Syrian refugees has illuminated a crisis of governance in Jordan. According to a REACH assessment previously mentioned, "many of the drivers of tension between Syrian refugees and their host communities are structural vulnerabilities within the Jordanian population which predate the Syrian crisis" (REACH 2013: 2). They "are being exacerbated by the large numbers of Syrians who sought refuge in Jordan" (REACH 2013: 2). The International Monetary Fund supports this analysis. Indeed, the Syrian Refugee Crisis has been weighing down growth in Jordan, but the roots of the challenges run deeper (Francis 2015). Syrian refugees have stressed economic and resource infrastructure in Jordan, which was already suffering from structural issues before the refugee crisis.

A broad range of conditions that threaten survival, livelihood and dignity were lacking especially in northern Jordan. The challenge for the Kingdom is to acknowledge the linkages and the interdependencies between development, human rights and national security (UN Human Security Unit). Tensions and vulnerability developed above threaten the long-term stability of the state.

This approach might challenge the assumption that tensions arise between host communities and Syrian refugees. As argued by D. Chatty in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, "social divisions are not so much between refugees and citizens but rather are derived from socioeconomic, tribal, and ethno-religious factors" (Chatty 2017: 582). Enhancing the resilience of communities should be considered as part of a wider agenda of addressing structural vulnerabilities.

As explained above Jordan relies heavily on foreign assistance. In 2016, the European Union and Jordan adopted the 'Jordan Compact' to "guide the Kingdom's efforts to improve the living conditions of both Syrian refugees in Jordan and vulnerable host communities" (European Commission 2016: 1). More than €747 million for 2016-2017 are aimed at fostering growth and job opportunities, improving the governance and rule of law as well as enhancing the regional stability and countering terrorism. The overall objective is to

“improve the socio-economic prospects, security, stability and resilience of Jordan” (European Commission 2016: 1). The challenging living conditions of both Syrian refugees and host communities have been fully integrated in this framework at the macro level.

To tackle human security, a people-centred approach is key. Such an approach should be reflected in the way development and humanitarian assistance is provided. Micro-level development approaches are focused on achieving results at the individual level, and therefore must be fostered to tackle the vulnerabilities that diminish the human security of both refugees and host communities. The Government of Jordan was compelled to adjust some policies to receive the macro financial assistance from the EU. As such the cost of work permits for Syrian workers has been eliminated to reduce barriers for the involvement of those foreign workers in the labour market. Yet, the seven categories of threats to human security which are economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political could be addressed in the development projects to bridge the gap between micro and macro level approaches.

As reflected in various human rights instruments, “states also exist to safeguard the rights of their citizens at home and abroad, non-citizens in transit, persons fleeing persecution at their borders, refugees and immigrants” (Kerwin 2016: 91). It might be time to redraft the terms of Jordan’s dependence on foreign partners. Rather than only encouraging structural reforms, the inclusion of human security indicators in the framing and the monitoring and evaluation of programmes could ensure that they pave the way for a human security perspective in the framing of policies.

## **Conclusion**

Dealing with the challenges that arose with the influx of Syrian refugees has been a priority for the Jordan government since 2012 and still is. The present article has highlighted the enormous deficits that must be tackled at the community level. Changes in the level of violence between communities competing for jobs and resources will depend on whether the government can improve local governance. Yet, Jordan’s job market is deficient and, as highlighted previously, structural vulnerabilities are partly to blame. In the meantime, Jordan has no choice but to acknowledge its volatile security environment. The unfolding of the war in Syria is also unclear, and the return of thousands of Syrian refugees is premature. The article has demonstrated how Jordan has indeed been using the challenges as a *leitmotiv* of its foreign policy. Jordan is a strategic partner for the US but also for the EU whose politicians are justifying aid to retain the millions of Syrians to stay in the region. However, EU Member States are already pressuring the Jordan government via the Global Compact which makes some aid delivery conditional upon access to the Jordan job market for Syrian refugees. The

government now has to prove that it has acknowledged the need for reforms. It might be that the first to express their dissatisfaction are not external partners but rather the Jordanian themselves.

– I reflect –

The challenging protection of Syrian refugees in Jordan is a daily topic in the Jordanian capital, where many humanitarian workers are based. It's also a recurring subject in everyday conversations with Jordanian friends. While I was doing an internship in Amman at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), I decided to take advantage of being in the country and of the geographic proximity with Jordanian as well as with Syrian refugees, to put in perspective both sides of the sometimes virulent dialectic I heard: the human security vs. national security pleas. I hope I managed to put forward in this paper how both are far from being conflicting but rather complementary.

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