

Refugees in Jordan and the Regional Turmoil

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News

The first UNHCR 2015-update on the refugee situation in Jordan has just been published. It is stated, that "UNHCR's foremost priority remains to ensure that Jordan's largely favourable protection environment is maintained in 2015, despite new arrivals of Syrians potentially further straining already limited resources." The Jordanian approach to receiving what in the planning figures for 2015 together with the ones already arrived will add up to almost three quarters of a million Syrian refugees, has been one of hospitality, despite, as noted in the update, substantial problems for a country with approximately 6.5 million inhabitants with relatively scarce Jordanian resources.

Key Words

Jordan, Syria, Iraq, refugees, bread subsidies, cost-benefit, statistics, regional turmoil.

Summary

Taking its point of departure in the first UNHCR 2015-update on the refugee situation in Jordan the article discusses the recent development in Jordan, where regional turmoil for years has resulted in involuntary mass influx of refugees. An in some ways similar development took place in 1990-91 following the Gulf war, it happened again after the American led invasion in 2003 and after the so-called Arab Spring, where the tragic war in Syria and most recently the emergence of IS in Iraq and Syria has led to a situation, where more refugees are entering Jordan. The refugee issue plays an important role for Jordan, it produces regional and international financial and political support for the regime and also internally in Jordan results in support for King Abdullah and the Jordanian regime.

Analysis:

More than 80 percent of the Syrians have settled outside the camps and live in Jordan's major towns and cities. Being refugees they are not legally allowed to work in Jordan, so they rely on food parcels, cash vouchers and charitable donations distributed by the UNHCR and other programmes.¹ Added to that they live from own savings, and to an increasing degree poorly paid jobs in the informal Jordanian service sector, exposed to competition from Egyptians and migrants from Asia. It is an interesting fact that the Jordanian subsidized bread is part of the conditions for the refugees. Due to the Jordanian open-door-policy the Syrian refugees have access to some of the Jordanian public services like health care and education.

As pointed at by José Ciro Martínez the bread is rarely mentioned in reports dealing with living costs calculations from the UN or NGOs involved in aid programmes in Jordan. Since the subsidies are relatively significant this is odd – the “bread subsidy is implicitly regarded as a national welfare program outside of their purview, a blessing that arrives without prayer.”² In reality the bread thus contributes to making a temporary (?) stay possible for Syrian refugees in Jordan and this means that the refugees receive a part of their means of subsistence via an arrangement, which is maintained at high costs for the Jordanian state. The bread subsidies is an important part of Jordanian state policies, it helps poor Jordanian households – and the Syrian refugees – upholding an acceptable life.

Nothing seems to indicate that the conflict in Syria is close to its ending. Unfortunately rather the opposite. Realistically speaking Jordan will therefore receive more refugees from Syria in the coming years, until the devastating crisis comes to an end. In 1990-91 Jordan received up to a million people (of which many were Palestinians) uprooted from Kuwait, Iraq and other states in the MENA-region. At least 300.000 stayed in Jordan. The 1990s in Jordan thus became a period where the Jordanian society was seriously affected by the involuntary mass influx. And an in some ways similar development took place after the American led invasion in Iraq in March 2003, where hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled from Iraq and settled in Jordan (and Syria). It was estimated that

¹ José Ciro Martínez, "Bread Is Life. The Intersection of Welfare and Emergency Aid in Jordan," *Middle East Report* 272, no. Fall 2014 (2014).

² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

up to three quarters of a million Iraqis settled in Jordan, a number which later turned out to be exaggerated. Jordan has in other words several times been exposed to consequences of regional crisis, where war situations in neighbouring states have resulted in major influx of refugees.

Earlier Examples of Mass Influx into Jordan

Following the Gulf-war in 1990-91 Jordan received a huge amount of refugees, a large number of which were Palestinians who were deported from Kuwait as a result of the alignment between Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Yasser Arafat of PLO. According to Steven J. Rosen the deportations decimated the Palestinian population in Kuwait from 400,000-450,000 to 10,000-22,000.³ The process was dramatic and it is well-documented that many of the deportees were subjected to abuse or worse during the process of expulsion. As mentioned by Rosen, "Many of these Palestinians had lived in Kuwait for decades, and generations of their children were born there. Palestinian school teachers, doctors, nurses, administrators, financiers, accountants, engineers, and university professors who helped to build Kuwait, were forcibly uprooted and expelled."⁴ Receiving maybe 400.000 Palestinians more or less overnight is no easy task. The situation in 1990-91 resulted in the short-term perspective in significant problems for the Jordanian state, but since then the actual net outcome in the long run for Jordan has been discussed.

Nicholas van Hear has demonstrated that it is necessary to analyze a phenomenon as complex as the situation in the early 1990s in Jordan from a number of different angles. His overall conclusion is that from an economic point of view "the mass arrival from Kuwait and other Gulf states did not result in unmitigated disaster but may have contributed to an economic recovery in Jordan".⁵ This however, does not mean that there were no problems. Van Hear shows how, for "many returnees, as for any of their relatives and dependents long in Jordan, the consequences of the events of 1990-92 were unambiguously negative."⁶ This was due to increasing poverty among some of the returnees, general socioeconomic differentiation and a diminishing cohesiveness of the Jordanian society as rivalries between the established population and the newcomers increased.

³ Steven J. Rosen, "Kuwait Expels Thousands of Palestinians," *Middle East Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2012).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵ Nicholas van Hear, "The Impact of the Involuntary Mass 'Return' to Jordan in the Wake of the Gulf Crisis," *International Migration Review* 29, no. 2 (1995).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

The cohesiveness theme was (and is still) very obvious in connection with the arrival of Iraqis following the war in Iraq in 2003. The war was expected to produce a flood of war refugees. This did not really happen, but in the years after the war significant numbers of Iraqis fled to Syria and Jordan. Official Jordanian figures estimated the number of Iraqis in Jordan between 500.000 and 1 million and, as mentioned by Nicholas Seeley, "though many of these people were long-term residents who had come during the 1991 Gulf war or earlier, the media described them indiscriminately as refugees, evoking images of poor, huddled masses."⁷ Something seemed to imply that the Iraqi displacement crisis with the good help of UN agencies was used by the Jordanian regime to secure external patronage and a stable income from the international donors.

The question of the Iraqi refugees was discussed at many different levels in the public debate in Jordan.⁸ Beyond the sympathy for the Arab brothers and sisters from Iraq some Jordanians complained about rising prices for housing in the districts in Amman, where the Iraqis settled. Some even claimed that the Iraqis in different ways were offered better conditions in Jordan than poor Jordanians. Recently the discussions have gained new life, due to the developments in Iraq, where the repression of the locals by the IS in some areas, persecution of religious groups etc. has resulted in an increasing number of Iraqis being registered as refugees in Jordan. The recent situation regarding Syrian refugees fleeing to Jordan is gradually interfering with the situation for the Iraqis, as mentioned in the newly published UNHCR-update: "The continuing influx of Syrians is likely to affect UNHCR's activities to address the needs of Iraqi refugees in Jordan."⁹ The rising regional tensions as a result of the active presence of IS in both Iraq and Syria and the continued fighting in both countries add a security dimension to the refugee issue.¹⁰ This makes it even more important for the regime in Jordan to secure that its policies enjoy the support of both its population and the support of its regional and international allies.

⁷ Nicholas Seeley, "The Politics of Aid to Displaced Iraqis in Jordan," Middle East Report 256, no. Fall 2010 (2010).

⁸ The following is partly based on observations and informal interviews by the author in Jordan over the last decade.

⁹ UNHCR, "Unhcr Global Appeal 2015. Jordan.", p. 2.

¹⁰ Nur Köprülü, "Jordan since the Uprisings: Between Change and Stability," Middle East Policy 21, no. 2 (2014)

Jordan and the Recent Crisis in Syria and Iraq

The brutal war in Syria seemed from 2012 and onwards to risk “turning Syria into another Afghanistan, Iraq or even Somalia”.¹¹ The Jordanian regime in the first place suggested that a gradual negotiated transition would be best for the Syrians and for their neighbors. An important reason for that, as mentioned by Curtis Ryan, was the fact that thousands of Syrian refugees were pouring across the border to flee the violence in their country.¹² The Syrian refugees quickly became one of several foreign policy challenges, which in the Syrian public discourse became dominant. One of the reasons for that was the security aspect. And following the entrance of the IS on the political scenes in Iraq and Syria the security dimension of the regional turmoil became emphasized: problematic groups might hide members of their network among refugees while crossing the Jordanian borders. In a recent interview in Jordan Times Curtis Ryan confirms this and underlines that the rise of the IS has become a more pressing security concern than the Syrian civil war itself.¹³

Added to that the presence of the Syrian (and Iraqi) refugees in Jordan contribute to securing economic support from regional state actors in the Gulf, from international donors like the IMF and the World Bank and not least from the US and the EU. José Ciro Martínez even claims that “Once the Syrian crisis ends, or once global concern fades and funding dries up, the Bretton Woods institutions are likely to resume their campaign to eliminate the bread subsidy”.¹⁴ It is of course difficult to predict if the IMF and the World Bank in a post-crisis situation in Syria and Iraq will insist that Jordan should abstain from subsidizing bread, but it is a fact that these two significant international donors earlier have criticized the Jordanian subsidies.

The Jordanian regime has an interest in exaggerating expenditures like that and other types of costs related to the foreigners staying and the newcomers arriving in Jordan. The policies no doubt also contribute to creating a positive attitude towards the regime and King Abdullah. Jordan obviously has (and has had) huge expenses in connection with receiving the refugees from Iraq and Syria, but the refugees also provide Jordan with regional and international support. Furthermore the refugees and the role Jordan is playing while dealing with them strengthens the Jordanian regime internally in Jordan. The criticism of King Abdullah and the Jordanian government which a few years ago often

¹¹ Curtis Ryan, "Jordanian Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring," *ibid.*, no. 1., p. 144.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Jordan Times, 5 January, 2015: Surviving 2014 regional challenges proved Jordan's resilience – analysts.

¹⁴ Martínez, "Bread Is Life. The Intersection of Welfare and Emergency Aid in Jordan.", p. 272.

were heard in Jordan have to some degree disappeared in recent years. The critical regional situation due to the crisis in Syria and Iraq, the presence of IS and the challenges related to the refugees have emphasized the importance of Jordan as a stable actor in a region in turmoil and as a safe haven for the refugees produced by the turmoil in its neighbouring states. No mystery if the Jordanian state is speculating a bit in gaining regional and international support by referring to the huge numbers of refugees and the expenses related to their presence in Jordan.

About the author

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