UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

CIVIL DOCUMENTATION FOR REFUGEES IN JORDAN

Evolution, Achievements, and Future Priorities (2011-2025)

This report provides a comprehensive longitudinal analysis of the evolution of access to civil documentation of refugees in Jordan from the onset of the Syria crisis in 2011 through December 2025.

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Executive Summary

Overview

This report provides a comprehensive longitudinal analysis of the evolution of access to civil documentation of refugees in Jordan from the onset of the Syria crisis in 2011 through December 2025. While the focus of this report is on Syrian refugees as they constitute the majority of the registered refugee population with UNHCR in Jordan, civil documentation matters for refugees of other nationalities are in practice addressed as well. The report details the strategic shift from an initial emergency response to a more advanced and institutionalized policy framework, led by the Government of Jordan, to safeguard the legal identity of refugees in Jordan. As of the end of 2025, Jordan hosted a little over 444,000 refugees— 95% of whom are Syrian—under the governance of the 1998 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

Key Findings & Achievements

The analysis identifies that the lack of documentation among refugees stemmed primarily from disrupted services in their country of origin, financial barriers, lack of legal awareness, irregular entry into Jordan, and/or for what is so called "Shaikh marriage" [1].

To address these challenges, the Government of Jordan (Government), in collaboration with UNHCR and partners such as the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), implemented critical interventions:

- **Technological Integration:** Updating the paper-based Ministry of Interior (MOI) service cards (SC) issued to Syrian refugees in 2011 to biometric iris-scan cards in 2013 which streamlined access to essential services and regulated legal status.
- **Institutional Access:** Establishing of Sharia Courts and Civil Status Department offices directly within Zaatari and Azraq camps which allowed for on-site issuance of thousands of birth and marriage certificates, significantly mitigating the risk of statelessness.
- **Legal Rectification:** Issuing special amnesty periods and creating a Special Committee to review cases which allowed refugees with irregular or fraudulent entry documents to rectify their legal status, processing over 3,000 individuals by late 2025.

[1] i.e. religious marriage contracts

Current Challenges

Despite these milestones, the report highlights persistent gaps. Refugees from other nationalities (Iraqi, Yemeni, Sudanese, and Somali) face unique hurdles, including prohibitive consular fees and a lack of diplomatic representation often leading to unregistered vital events. Furthermore, the reduction in international funding threatens the sustainability of legal aid programs, particularly in governorates like Ma'an and Al Aqaba where coverage is already limited.

Introduction

From 2011 onwards, the Syrian civil war led to a large influx of refugees into neighboring countries, particularly Jordan, which hosted up to **676,283 Syrian refugees at its peak in 2018**.[2] Jordan has continued to assume significant humanitarian responsibility by hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees, primarily Syrian but also Iraqi, Sudanese, Somali, and Yemeni nationals for decades. By end December 2025, a total of 444,311 refugees were registered with UNHCR in Jordan, 95% of whom are Syrian. The Government has reported the number of Syrians in Jordan to be approximately 1.4 million[3]. All refugees are subject to the 1998 MoU which establishes the legal and operational framework for asylum procedures, refugee protection, and the responsibilities of both parties[4].

With the increase in refugee numbers and their diverse needs, civil documentation rapidly emerged as a critical legal and administrative issue[5] with direct consequences for refugees' ability to exercise their fundamental rights. This included registration of birth, marriage, and death as well as issuance of identity cards or work permits. For example, of the **676,283** Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR in the year 2018[6], 81% lacked different types of official documents which, in turn, impeded refugees' access to essential services and rights. To address these critical challenges, the Government, together with relevant international and national actors, adopted both humanitarian and legal measures to strengthen protection for refugees.

Over time, Jordan's management of the refugee portfolio evolved from one of an emergency response to a comprehensive institutional policy, which reflected Jordan's commitment to the right to legal identity as a fundamental human right. Civil Status and Passport

[2] See: Annual statistical report for Syrian Arab Rep. | UNHCR PSR
[3] HM King Abdullah's speech at the GRF in 2023. At the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva - King Abdullah II Official Website; MOI Farrayeh's speech from the Vienna conference in fall 2025.
His Excellency the Minister of Interior, Mazen Al-Faraya, participated in the tenth edition of the Vienna - Ministry of Interior
[4] UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Jordan: Agreement Between the Government of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, July 1997, https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unhcr/1997/en/17770 .
[5] See: United Nations, *Strategy for Legal Identity for All - Concept note developed by the United Nations Legal Identity Expert Group*, June 2019, https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/UN-Strategy-for-LIA.pdf, and https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/securing-status.pdf
[6] see: Annual statistical report for Syrian Arab Rep. | UNHCR PSR

Department[7] offices were established in the refugee camps and government personnel were trained on the different Syrian documents as well as importance of prevention of statelessness. In addition, exemption of fines was introduced for late birth registration and undocumented marriages (sheikh's marriages). Accordingly, UNHCR and ARDD launched different campaigns between 2013 to 2018 to raise awareness of these measures and explain the process of registering vital incidents. Throughout these years, registration with UNHCR Jordan enhanced access to civil documentation. UNHCR documents were critically important for ensuring refugees' legal status in Jordan, obtaining the Ministry of Interior Service Card (MOI SC) - which in turn allowed refugees to access different public service providers for education, healthcare, and humanitarian assistance, and provided protection from *refoulement*.

In 2019, following a Cabinet decision issued by the Government, registration with UNHCR was suspended for new arrivals with the exception of newborn babies to already registered families. This resulted in some family members being registered while others unregistered. Suspension of registration has led to lack of effective international protection and disruption of access to services for the unregistered.

This report examines the historical evolution of refugees' access to civil documentation in Jordan from the onset of the Syria refugee crisis in 2011 to date. Specifically, the report addresses initial challenges in identity verification and civil status event registration, alongside subsequent policy and procedure advancements resulting from collaborative efforts between the Government, UNHCR, ARDD, and other legal service partners.

This report is based on a desk review, including official minutes of meetings, advocacy efforts, and official communication from different collaborations between UNHCR, Government and other local and international actors to provide a chronological evolution of policies, legislative and administrative developments, and legal instruments.

Data Protection

UNHCR's approach to data protection and responsible data sharing has been central to facilitating access to legal documentation, public services, and service delivery as data protection is a cornerstone of accountability and trust. Protecting the personal data of forcibly displaced and stateless persons is not only a legal and ethical obligation but also essential to preserving their dignity, fundamental rights, and freedoms.

To ensure this is carried out in accordance with UNHCR's General Policy on Data Protection and Privacy[8] and international data protection standards, UNHCR Jordan has established

[7] See Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Ministry of Interior, Civil Status and Passports , https://www.cspd.gov.jo/Default/En .
[8] https://www.refworld.org/policy/strategy/unhcr/2022/en/124207

approximately 60 formal data-sharing agreements with different relevant actors. Notably, these include agreements with the Ministry of Interior represented by the Refugee Affairs Coordination Office (RACO) and the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD), and with ARDD, which have been instrumental in facilitating refugees' access to legal documentation. These agreements result from a structured process with partners to clearly define the specific purposes for which data may be used, and agree on safeguards such as confidentiality, purpose limitation, and security measures. This approach is explained to refugees during registration as a means to inform them of their rights and responsibilities. This also ensures that collaboration enables access to essential services without compromising the privacy of the people we serve.

Causes of lack of documentation

Lack of documentation results in refugees being unable to register vital events such as births, deaths, or marriages. Without officially recognized documents to prove their legal identity or establish their nationality, both refugees and their children face a heightened risk of statelessness.[9] This risk is further exacerbated by difficulties in proving lineage and nationality transmission, particularly when children are born outside of legally recognized marriages or when birth registration is delayed.[10]

During the Syria crisis, reasons for lack of documents amongst refugees varied, including certain cultural practices and priorities, suspension of government services in Syria, war, financial cost, lack of awareness, and misleading information.[11] The main causes for lack of documentation of Syrian refugees in Jordan can be categorized as follows:

I. **Lack of awareness:** At the outset of the crisis, refugees had insufficient understanding of the importance of timely documentation coupled with a belief that Syrian law would take precedence over Jordanian law. It was also observed that some refugees did not consistently or diligently pursue registration and documentation processes for marriage and birth, in the belief that '*Sheikh marriages'* were valid or that the registration of children was not a priority in the face of other life-saving priorities (securing food, shelter etc.).

II. **Disruption in Government services inside Syria:** Many refugees either lost their documents or did not manage to obtain or issue their documents prior to their flight

[9] See UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Strategic Direction 2022 – 2026,* p. 25, https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/UNHCR%20Strategic%20Directions%202022--2026.pdf , which outlines UNHCR's global priorities, including protection and legal identity, with a focus on reducing statelessness and ensuring access to documentation.
[10] Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), *Securing Status Syrian refugees and the documentation of legal status, identity, and family relationships in Jordan*, 2016 , p.31-37, https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/52314.
[11] Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD*), Documentation for Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Good Practices and Challenges (Working Paper),* 2020, p.6, https://ardd-jo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Documentation-for-Syrian-Refugees-in-Jordan-Good-Practices-and-ChallengesWorking-Paper.pdf

as many civil registry offices and courts were affected by the destruction caused by the conflict in Syria.

III. **Avoiding penalties:** Delayed registration of vital events in Jordan resulted in financial fines imposed by the law, resulting in refugees refraining from registration to avoid these costs.

IV. **Document fraud and irregular entry:** Due to war and unrest in Syria, many refugees resorted to irregular entry methods into Jordan, including the use of forged documents *(defined as documents that have been altered or created with the intent to deceive, usually by changing signatures, dates, or content)* or fraudulent documents *(defined as those that are intentionally presented to mislead or gain an unlawful advantage)*. For example, some refugees used their relatives' documents as their own for entry or registered children under different names, creating long-term identity verification problems. These practices, though understandable as a situation of *force majeure* from the point of view of the refugees, are criminalized under Jordanian Penal law no. 16 of 1960 and can be considered by the Government as a threat to national security.[12] Eventually, they create complex legal and security challenges as refugees often go on to access services and document family matters with forged identities. This also elevates the risk of trafficking, especially for children.

V. **Unregistered marriages and their consequences:** Syrian families, lacking essential civil documents or knowledge of Jordanian legal procedures, frequently resorted to informal 'Sheikh's contracts' which is not legally recognized. These unregistered marriages created significant legal and administrative hurdles, including subsequent complications with birth registration, establishing lineage, and addressing personal status matters (marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance). The absence of legal marriage documentation particularly impacts women, leaving them without protection for spousal support, alimony, or property rights. The inability to prove paternity through legal marriage documentation inevitably heightens the risk of statelessness for children as previously mentioned.[13]

[12] See provision of penal code 153 which stipulates that "Article (153) "Notwithstanding what is stated in any other law: 1- Whoever enters or leaves the Kingdom illegally shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of no less than three months, and whoever helps him do so shall be punished with the same penalty.
[13] Ibid., p.34.

VI. **Birth registration challenges:** At the onset of the Syria crisis, refugees in Jordan experienced numerous challenges when attempting to register births within the mandated 30-day legal timeframe, primarily stemming from the lack of necessary documents (like marriage certificates), the distance to registration centers, and a general unawareness of specific Jordanian legal procedures. Many refugees erroneously believed that Syrian law applied to them rather than Jordanian law,[14] which often led to avoiding or postponing registration. These delays resulted in fines for overdue registration that many families could not afford, thus creating a vicious cycle where non-payment exacerbated the issuance of proper documentation. The accumulated effect of these procedural violations and legal misunderstandings was the severe complication of establishing a legal identity for Syrian children born in Jordan, which in turn significantly increased their risk of statelessness.

Addressing documentation gaps and challenges (2011 – present)[15]

At the beginning of the Syria refugee influx in 2011, the Government, with support from UNHCR and partners, implemented a series of measures to address documentation gaps and ensure legal identity for refugees. These efforts have evolved over time, introducing innovative solutions such as biometric registration, specialized judicial mechanisms, and policy reforms aimed at safeguarding rights, facilitating access to services, and preventing statelessness.

The following outlines the key milestones and achievements in this ongoing process:

I. 2011 – present: Provision of legal assistance (counselling, representation and mediation) to refugees[16] to obtain civil documentation as well as technical and financial support to institutional partners.

[14] Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), *Documentation for Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Good Practices and Challenges (Working Paper),* 2023, p. 3–5, https://ardd-jo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Documentation-for-Syrian-Refugees-in-Jordan-Good-Practices-and-ChallengesWorking-Paper.pdf .
[15] All figures reflected in this section are from UNHCR records and from data shared by the Government of Jordan.
[16] For the purpose of this report, "provision of legal assistance" refers to the activities of UNHCR Jordan, and of its legal aid partner ARDD under the partnership framework.

From 2011 to 2025, ARDD's legal services in cooperation with UNHCR achieved the following:

A. Birth registration & statelessness prevention[17]

- Resolved more than 20,500 cases, resulting in the issuance of birth certificates for unregistered Syrian infants.
- Provided 17,276 legal consultations on birth registration/document rectification.[18]

B. Legal aid & access to justice

- Provided more than 56,000 instances of consultations and legal representation.
- Conducted 450 training workshops in Mafraq, Zarqa, and Irbid on marriage/birth registration.

C. Institutional impact & systemic solutions

Supported Sharia Court operations in Zaatari and Azraq (from 2014 to 2025) which:

- Processed more than 18,500 marriages (ARDD prepared the lawsuit plaintiff list before proceeding to court, equipping refugees with the necessary legal information and documents for their hearings).
- Resolved 12,420 divorce cases.
- Legally rectified more than 5,330 unregistered "*Sheikh marriages*".
- Developed simplified legal guidelines with the Civil Status Department to reduce procedural errors.

D. Advocacy & capacity building

Implemented a flagship project, "Enhancing Protection through Registration" (2018–2021), funded by Switzerland, in partnership with UNHCR. The purpose of the project was to raise awareness on the importance of registration and documentation for vital events and personal status issues such as birth, death, marriage, custody and other related matters. Forty-seven cases of '*Sheikh marriages* 'were documented legally before the court and the fine of JOD 1,000 covered by the project.

II. 2011-2012: *Ministry of Interior Service Card (MOI SC)* - The Government began registering refugees using preliminary service cards, issued by the MOI, these preliminary cards lacked security features and biometrics (iris scan) as they were printed on regular paper with the Government logo only. Throughout this timeframe, the Government provided pink receipts[19] to refugees whose documents were being held. These slips acted as verification that the bearer had documentation in

[17] All data in this section are taken from ARDD's records,

[18] Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), *ARDD issues a legal paper on Birth registration statistics for Syrian Refugees in Jordan,* June 2019, https://ardd-jo.org/publication/ardd-issues-a-legal-paper-on-birth-registration-statistics-for-syrian-refugees-in-jordan/ .

[19] This notification slip was issued by the Government to refugees, serving as proof that their official documents are being retained. This slip was introduced prior to the Ministry of Interior's service card, and its purpose was solely to provide refugees with evidence of document retention, without any alteration to its original notion. This was suspended upon the issuance of MOI's SC.

possession of the Government, which granted a form of protection to the individual as the pink receipt confirmed to any law enforcement agency and service provider that the individual entered the country with documents.

III. 2013: *MOI SC with Iris scan*[20] - The Government and UNHCR initiated refugee registration throughout the country using an enhanced MOI SC which included Iris scan technology, replacing the paper-based MOI SC. This development marked an important advancement in documentation, and the MOI SC became key to:

- Providing refugees with official identity documentation alongside UNHCR's attestations
- Regulating refugees' legal status in alignment with Jordanian laws
- Facilitating access to essential services (education, registration of vital events, healthcare, and humanitarian aid)
- Preventing double registration through Government -UNHCR data coordination
- Enabling work opportunities and administrative service access under existing regulations
- Resolving critical gaps in vital events documentation.

IV. 2014–2015: Establishment of Sharia Courts in Azraq and Zaatari Camps to:

- Enable completion of marriage, divorce, and legal documentation procedures inside camps (as of end of December 2025, 70,402 refugees benefited from the court services in the camps)
- Eliminate the need for refugees to travel to courts outside the camps
- Address widespread unregistered marriages/births through specialized judicial oversight
- Enhance legal transparency, protect women and children, and enable accurate data tracking.

V. 2014–2015: *Amnesty for unregistered marriages*[21] - Following advocacy by UNHCR and ARDD, the Government granted two amnesty periods (late 2014 and 2015) allowing Syrian refugees to:

- Re-document marriages conducted outside Sharia courts (3,000 couples benefited from the amnesty and legalized their marriage without fines)
- Waive fines up to 1,000 JOD mandated by the Personal Status Law

[20] The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Ministry of Interior, *Service card for the Syrian community,* https://moi.gov.jo/EN/Pages/Service_card_for_the_Syrian_community.
[21] The Jordan Times, *Couples with undocumented marriages urged to rectify situation before year end,* November 2014, https://jordantimes.com/news/local/couples-undocumented-marriages-urged-rectify-situation-year-end .

- Rectify legal status without financial penalties, mitigating risks to paternity proof and birth registration
- Transform civil documentation from a temporary response to sustainable institutionalization by having more harmonized procedures between civil registry offices and their HQ.

VI. 2015: *Deployment of Civil Status and Passports Department Staff* - Official Civil Status and Passports Department personnel were deployed to Zaatari and Azraq camps to:

- Issue official documents (mainly birth certificates) within camps **(as of end of December 2025 32,436 birth certificates were issued)**
- Reduce documentation delays and simplify procedures for refugees lacking documents
- Encourage immediate registration of vital events, preventing statelessness.

VII. 2015-2018: *Waiving fines for late registration of birth registration* – Since at the onset of the Syria crisis, because many refugee families lacked the financial resources to complete timely birth registration, many children remained unregistered. The Government agreed to grant a fine exemption for late birth registration for all camp residents for three consecutive years from 2016, ***which benefited 4,500*** *children.*[22]

VIII. 2015: Establishment of the Special Committee (SC) , which is represented by different government divisions, to address the issue of refugees who entered Jordan with fraudulent/forged documents. The SC was established to:

- Rectify legal identity for those who entered with fraudulent/forged documentation or irregular way ***(as of the end of December 2025, 3,807 individuals had their legal identity rectified by the SC)***
- Update vital event documentation with the Civil Status and Passports Department and Sharia Courts (out of the 3,808 cases rectified by the SC, 520 individuals required legal follow up within the courts and Civil Registry)
- Enable name, date, and kinship rectification through legal follow-up by provided by ARDD, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and UNHCR
- Ensure refugees' access to services and durable solutions through verified legal identity.

IX. 2018–2019: *Regularization Campaign for Urban Syrians*[23] - The Government and UNHCR launched a time-limited campaign documenting Syrians residing irregularly

[22] Those exemptions were granted in the following years: 2016,2017 and 201,8 and were issued by Civil Status and Passport Department.
[23] See UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Rectification of Status Campaign: Extension of the Deadline*, October 2018, https://www.unhcr.org/jo/ar/news/rectification-status-campaign-extension-deadline .

outside the camps - whether by leaving the camp without permission or not returning within the authorized period of the permission, allowing them to rectify their legal identity. Through the regularization period (2018-2019) ***legal identity of 24,257 individuals was rectified.*** This also allowed them to obtain service cards granting access to education, healthcare, and work and registration of vital events.

Importance of documentation within the context of return to Syria

Civil documentation is one of the key components needed for safe, dignified, and sustainable returns for Syrian refugees,[24] serving as irrefutable proof of identity, kinship, and legal status, all of which are critical for reintegration into Syria, especially for women and children. Without recognized documents, returnees face insurmountable barriers in their country: denial of property rights, restricted access to services, conscription risks, and the risk of statelessness. In recognition of this, and to ensure that returns are orderly and that refugees can claim their rights once back in their country, both the Government and UNHCR have prioritized documentation, ensuring refugees possess complete and verifiable records upon return.[25]

Data Coordination: The Government shares data with UNHCR of returnees to validate records on both sides, addressing errors and reducing bureaucratic delays.

Border Procedures: Simplified exit procedures for refugees, including:

- the acceptance of temporary travel document issuance for those with lost/destroyed papers from the Syrian Embassy.
- allowing refugees lacking Syrian travel documents to depart using their MOI SC only.

Challenges faced by refugees of other nationalities in Jordan (Iraqi, Yemeni, Sudanese, and Somali)

Some refugees of other nationalities who entered Jordan irregularly due to security conditions in their home countries, lack personal documentation *(180 individuals as of end of December 2025)*. Others have lost the ability to renew passports or obtain personal documents (marriage contracts, birth certificates) because consular services are absent or not available in Jordan.

Meanwhile, those who entered with an *alias,* and had their individual number linked to that alias and not their actual name, ended up with their marriages and other vital events recorded

[24] See UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Executive Committee of the High Commissioner Programme, *76th Session - Update on UNHCR operations in the Middle East and North Africa,* October 2025, which highlights UNHCR's work in the MENA region, including legal aid and civil documentation support for returnees and refugees, especially in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.
[25] See 3RP Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, *Regional Strategic Overview 2025 – 3RP (Syria Crisis),* p.45, https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/3RP_2025.pdf .

with that *alias*. These cases have meanwhile been resolved by filing lawsuits to secure verdicts that subsequently facilitated the issuance of necessary vital incidents.

Improvements still needed

The requirement of having the main guardian, father or other legal guardian (Al-wali)[26], present – About 10 - 15 cases per year remain unable to register vital events - particularly birth, divorce, and proof of lineage - because the legal guardian is absent for different reasons.

Limited access to free legal aid in certain parts of the country Although programs have expanded, coverage continues to be restricted geographically and relies on international funding. This results in gaps in accessing legal support, particularly in remote regions or among unregistered refugees, leaving cases unresolved. According to data gathered by UNHCR via individual case management and focus group discussions, access to legal aid services is insufficient in some governorates, namely Ma'an, Ajloun, Al Aqaba, and Al Tafilah, where refugees comprise approximately 4% of the total refugee population as of end 2025.

Requirements for original documents & consular attestations – Marriage and birth registration often requires original documents or embassy attestations, which are nearly impossible for refugees who lost their papers or do not wish to contact their home-country authorities. Although the Government has facilitated the resolution of some cases, the absence of a comprehensive policy results in ad hoc interventions.

Prohibitive costs of document issuance/attestation by embassies and consulates of the country of origin (for refugees other than Syrian) - Fees for issuing or attesting documents through the consular services at the refugees' embassy is often high or not affordable, directly impacting civil registration and renewal of official documents in Jordan. For example, the average cost for ratifying documents is 25 JOD per document and 210 JOD for passport issuance at the Sudanese and Yemeni embassies respectively.

Absence of consular services - Some countries may not provide consular services to their nationals residing in Jordan in possession of an asylum-seeker or refugee document, further complicating national document acquisition.[27]

Reduction in international funding for documentation programs - Civil documentation and legal aid programs face increasing funding shortages which threaten the sustainability of status rectification programs, awareness campaigns, and field-based civil documentation activities.

[26] In Sharia law, the guardian (wali) of children is usually the father, or in his absence the paternal grandfather, sometimes the civil registry requires either the presence of the father or his documents even if the father is absent . This is one of the remaining challenges.
[27] It should be noted that when a refugee approaches the consulate or embassy of one's country of nationality this does not mean that they do not have reasonable refugee-related grounds to avail themselves of the protection of their own country.