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# Beyond Emergency Assistance: Syrian Refugees in Northern Iraq and Jordan

By *Michael Boyce*

Created 02/04/2014 - 00:00

## Policy recommendations

- The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should focus additional attention and resources on the large proportion of exiled Syrians who are living outside of camps in Jordan and northern Iraq. A particular effort should be made to identify and address the protection problems confronting these refugees, many of whom are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their basic needs.
- In northern Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) should ensure that non-camp refugees in all three of the region's governorates are treated on an equal basis with those who are accommodated in camps.
- In northern Iraq, UNHCR, humanitarian organizations, and donor nations must put pressure on the KRG to ensure that those refugees living outside of camps have equal access to assistance.
- Donor states should support the implementation of the 2014 Syria Regional Response plan (RRP6) in northern Iraq and Jordan, both through the provision of resources and advocacy with the authorities concerned.
- Development actors must do more to mitigate the impact of the Syrian refugee influx on host communities, public services, and government structures in northern Iraq and Jordan. The World Bank should be encouraged to assume the leadership role that it has offered to play in this respect.

In less than three years, the Syrian conflict has forced well over two million of that country's citizens to take refuge in other states. Some 200,000 have fled to the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, and 600,000 to Jordan, the two countries visited by Refugees International (RI) during its most recent mission to the Middle East.

These refugees seem likely to remain in exile for a considerable amount of time. Even if peace returns to the country quickly – a scenario that seems highly unlikely – the level of destruction in Syria is so great that not all of the refugees will be able to return in a speedy manner.

With the support of donor states and the humanitarian community, the Kurdistan Regional Government and Jordan have done a remarkable job in responding to the immediate challenges of the refugee influx. But the limitations of emergency assistance are becoming clear. A new and longer-term approach is now required – one that gives more attention to the situation of refugees living outside of camps, provides greater support to the communities most directly affected by the refugees' presence, and entails more extensive engagement by development organizations.

## Background

When an RI team visited northern Iraq last November, they met Adel, his wife and two daughters, refugees from Syria who were waiting to find out what assistance they could receive. Since arriving in March, the family had made ends meet by working on a farm in exchange for accommodation. But with

the onset of winter, the farmer no longer needed their labor and would not let them remain on the land.

The family traveled 65 kilometers to a local NGO to seek assistance. But their hopes were soon dashed, since Adel's family of four was not large enough to qualify for a winter fuel distribution.

Experiences like Adel's are common among the 1.7 million Syrian refugees who are living outside of camps. The vast majority of them are to be found in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey.

But increasingly (and unsurprisingly, given the scale and duration of the exodus) those with the means to do so are moving further afield in their effort to find a place of refuge and a better future. Ever larger numbers have been appearing in Egypt, and in recent months, Syrians have arrived in locations as diverse as Bulgaria, the Maldives, and Thailand.

Syrians who remain in the Middle East are confronted with a variety of different challenges, depending on the country they have fled to and whether they live in a camp or in a host community.

The main Syrian refugee camps in northern Iraq and Jordan have developed considerably and in a very positive manner since they opened less than two years ago. Since RI's previous visit in October 2012, the Domiz camp in Iraq's Dohuk governorate had installed a new water and sanitation system, expanded its registration area to accommodate 1,400 people per day, and even added a shuttle system that takes refugees into the nearest town so they can spend the food vouchers provided to them. New shops and shelters are springing up all over the enlarged camp area, an indication that the refugees are beginning to recognize that they may be in northern Iraq for much longer than they originally anticipated.

In Jordan, Zaatari camp is also beginning to look a little less like a camp and a little more like a settled community. The camp has been divided into a dozen sectors with their own administrative committees. Most of the refugees are now accommodated in caravans rather than tents. There is a new police station with professionally-trained personnel, an initiative that has contributed to a considerable reduction in levels of violence, vandalism, and criminality.

These developments are a testament to the efforts of host states, donor countries, humanitarian agencies, and the refugees themselves to make life in the camps a little more comfortable. But the fact of the matter is that the majority of the Syrian refugees in northern Iraq and Jordan are not living in camps, but are to be found scattered in many different cities, towns, and villages. These refugees are less visible, more difficult to access by humanitarian organizations, and, in many cases, struggling to make ends meet.

When RI visited the region in 2012, Iraqi and Jordanian citizens expressed a high degree of sympathy for the refugees and expressed their intention to support them as much as possible. Those Syrians who fled to northern Iraq (almost all of them Kurds) were welcomed as brothers and sisters by the Kurdish population in their country of asylum, many of whom had been brutally uprooted themselves by Saddam Hussein's army in the early 1990s. Similarly, those Syrians who crossed the border into Jordan were welcomed on the basis of the deep historical and cultural ties between the two countries.

While the level of hospitality shown to the Syrian refugees remains remarkable (especially when compared to the cold shoulder given to the few Syrians who have made it to Europe), growing concerns are being expressed about the impact of the refugee presence on the water supply, labor market, health, and education services.

As the refugee population swells, and the resulting pressure on local services and resources grows, host communities are becoming less welcoming in their attitude toward the new arrivals. Although Iraq and Jordan are both middle-income countries, a significant number of the people who live in refugee-hosting

areas there are extremely poor. In this context, targeting assistance at the Syrian population alone could easily reinforce the incipient resentment of local communities toward the refugees.

## **Assisting Refugees Outside of Camps**

When large numbers of Syrians began fleeing to Iraq in 2012, the majority were accommodated in Domiz, a hastily-established camp on the site of a former army base. As the camp became increasingly congested, however, and as the conflict in Syria spread to new areas along the border, a different pattern of refugee settlement emerged. Today, more than half of the refugees live outside of camps in northern Iraq's three governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, and Suleimaniyah.

Refugees choose to live outside of Domiz and the other more recently established camps in northern Iraq for a variety of reasons. They consider the camp environment to be unsafe. They find city life more amenable. They have a better chance of finding work in urban areas, and being Kurds like the local population, they are not confronted with any language barriers when communicating with employers and landlords.

But their situation is becoming more difficult. Job opportunities are increasingly scarce, even though the Syrians are willing to accept substantially lower wages than Iraqis. At the same time, they have to pay rent, buy food, and get access to hard-pressed public services such as medical care and education. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that assist non-camp Syrians in northern Iraq work diligently. But they are short on funds and have had to make some hard decisions as to who they can support.

As a result of these factors, many of the refugees find themselves living in deteriorating conditions. Families are forced to move around in search of cheaper accommodation, with some resorting to unfinished and unsafe buildings. Children are going out to work rather than going to school, and health problems are being left unattended.

An additional complication is the unwillingness of some local authorities to allow the provision of assistance outside of camps. In Erbil, in particular, services are very scarce for those refugees who wish to remain in the community. The KRG should ensure that non-camp refugees in all three of the region's governorates are treated on an equal basis with those who are accommodated in camps, an objective that should also be supported by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), other humanitarian organizations, and donor states.

The situation for non-camp refugees in Jordan is also worrying. When RI met Badr and his family last November, they were living in a rented apartment in a small town an hour's drive from the capital Amman. They had originally taken refuge in Zaatari camp, but moved because of Badr's concern for the safety of his daughters. Badr had arrived with some money, but over the past nine months it had been largely spent. The women in his family also sold their jewelry to raise some additional cash. Now Badr is in debt to the local shopkeepers, and wondering how he will manage in the future.

Like Badr, many of the Syrians in Jordan prefer not to live in Zaatari, which quickly gained a reputation as a very harsh and lawless place in which to live. But as Amman became more crowded and expensive, the refugees began to look for other places to settle.

Some dispersed into the towns and villages of the Jordan River Valley, looking for opportunities in seasonal agricultural work. They were able to get by for a time by earning basic wages, renting the cheapest accommodation they could find, and pooling their resources in the event of any family emergencies. But seasonal work is by definition an unstable form of employment, and as in northern Iraq, a growing number of refugees in Jordan are beginning to ask how they will make ends meet in the future.

While a handful of projects run by humanitarian organizations are providing assistance to both Syrian refugees and poorer Jordanian communities in the area, the aid that they are able to provide reaches only a fraction of those in need.

UN agencies and donor countries have not been entirely blind to these problems. Indeed, the UN's 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan has a new emphasis on the provision of assistance to those who are living outside of camps. This is a welcome development and is fully consistent with UNHCR's global urban refugee policy, which underlines the importance of enabling refugees to live as normal a life as possible, particularly by having access to public services and the labor market.

Donor states should support the implementation of this strategy in Jordan and northern Iraq, both through the provision of resources and through advocacy with the authorities concerned. At the same time, UNHCR must tackle a very demanding double challenge: continuing to upgrade the services and facilities available in camps, while at the same time taking steps to identify, register, and support the urban refugee population, especially its more vulnerable members.

This, it should be noted, is by no means a new recommendation. Indeed, an evaluation undertaken by UNHCR in mid-2013 concluded that "while there have been mounting efforts by UNHCR and its partners to support refugees living outside camps, there is a need to significantly boost the humanitarian community's outreach to non-camp refugees."<sup>1</sup> [1]

That support and outreach should not only take the form of material assistance. UNHCR and its partners should also give greater attention to identifying and addressing the protection problems that confront the urban refugee populations – problems that seem certain to become more serious as the refugee situation persists.

## **Host States and Communities**

While the Syrian refugee crisis has received an enormous amount of international publicity, far less attention has been given to the plight of poorer members of the local population in refugee-hosting areas of Jordan and northern Iraq. And yet their circumstances are often just as difficult as those experienced by the refugees.

In the Jordan River Valley, for example, RI met two families who were living in a ramshackle two-room building that lacked a toilet and water supply, with broken windows and no lock on the front door. The children in the two families did not have shoes, despite living in a hilly area where the snow can be two to three feet high in the winter.

As with the refugees, poorer members of the host population sometimes feel obliged to take desperate and dangerous measures in order to get by. RI was told that one young man who usually lives in the house was absent, because he was on the run from the police. His crime? He was cutting down trees with a borrowed saw in order to provide his family with cooking and heating fuel.

A few international and local NGOs offer support to needy Jordanians in the area, and have established programs aimed at fostering good relations between local people and the Syrians. For example, RI met a highly motivated team which was in the process of identifying families who were in need of winter items such as heaters, fuel, blankets, and additional food.

The project has been stimulated in part by a Jordanian government ruling that requires humanitarian organizations assisting Syrian refugees to distribute a portion of their aid to members of the local community. It is an innovative approach that could usefully be replicated in refugee emergency operations elsewhere in the world.

The scale and likely duration of the Syrian refugee crisis is such, however, that the occasional distribution of relief items to poorer members of the host community cannot be considered an adequate response to local needs. The reality of the situation is that the economies, labor markets, public services, and administrative structures of Jordan and northern Iraq have been put under massive strain by the Syrian conflict and the refugee exodus that it has provoked.

A failure on the part of the international community to mitigate this pressure could have devastating consequences. Jordan and Iraq could be tempted to close their borders (which they have done on occasion in the past), making it impossible for victims of the Syrian conflict to find safety elsewhere.

Without additional international support, there will be more competition for limited resources between refugees and their local hosts and consequently a greater risk of tension (and even violence) between them. As well as contributing to the dangerous level of instability that already exists in the region, such an outcome might prompt greater numbers of Syrians to embark upon the hazardous and expensive journey to Europe.

In order to avert such dire scenarios, there is an urgent need for the existing refugee-focused assistance program to be complemented by broader-based development initiatives that strengthen the ability of host states and communities to withstand the shock they have experienced.

Some progress has already been made in this respect. The World Bank, for example, has taken a particularly keen interest in the developmental and fiscal implications of the refugee situation in Jordan and Lebanon. In the former country, the Bank has approved two projects that will support the country's strained services: one of \$150 million to strengthen Jordan's healthcare system and to help households who are confronted with rising prices for food and housing; and another of \$50 million in grants to local municipalities, so that they can strengthen service delivery.

In Lebanon, the World Bank (in association with development partners such as the European Union, International Monetary Fund, and a variety of UN agencies) has completed a detailed economic and social impact assessment in relation to the Syrian conflict and refugee exodus – the first of its type in the Bank's 70-year history. The KRG, however, has declined the World Bank's support due to concerns that this would encourage the Syrian Kurds to remain in exile – an outcome that is not consistent with the KRG's geopolitical ambitions.

While some initial steps have been taken to move away from a traditional humanitarian response and towards a more innovative developmental approach, there is still a very long way to go. As World Bank President Jim Yong Kim acknowledged on January 24, 2014, the Syrian refugee situation is "a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions, and right now we are not responding effectively."<sup>2</sup>

Kim went on to say that the response had failed not only due to a lack of funds, but also because leadership was missing and because humanitarian and development organizations had not made a concerted effort to address the situation. "There are many political difficulties in deciding who's going to step up," he said, but he added that his organization was "happy to lead" the effort. It is a bold commitment which must now be followed by appropriate action on the part of the World Bank.

*Daryl Grisgraber and Jeff Crisp traveled to Iraq and Jordan in November 2013 to assess the humanitarian response to Syrian refugees.*

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1 "From slow boil to breaking point: a real-time evaluation of UNHCR's response to the Syrian refugee emergency," UNHCR, Geneva, July 2013.

2 "World Bank chief Jim Yong Kim: Global response to Syrian refugees failing," CNN, January 24, 2014.

Accessed January 2014 from <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/24/business/davos-world-bank-syria/> [3]

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- Refugees International
- 2001 S Street NW, Suite 700
- Washington, DC 20009
  
- **Phone:** 202.828.0110
- **Fax:** 202.828.0819
- [ri@refugeesinternational.org](mailto:ri@refugeesinternational.org)

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