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# Hosting Syrian Refugees through the Development Lens: The Case of Jordan

Zaid Awamleh<sup>1</sup> and Alexandrine Dupras<sup>2</sup>

It is estimated that more than 6.8 million Syrian fled their country since 2011 (UNHCR, 2022). Jordan has received the second biggest number of Syrian refugees per capita, after Lebanon. Today, there are still around 1.3 million Syrian refugees in Jordan (ACAPS, 2023), out of 10.2 million inhabitants in total. As a receiving country, Jordan's trajectory for hosting Syrian refugees within its borders has been fluctuating, based on its own previous history of hosting other refugees, while also adapting to the events and perceived threats that the situation brought in.

In this article, we shed light on the Jordanian government's pivotal role in ensuring stability for refugees, thereby contributing to the country's economy in the form of a "refugee rent" (Kelberer, 2017; Tsourapas, 2019). In essence, delving into the refugee governance of the Syrian crisis in Jordan is not merely a case study but a lens through which to explore a new shift of governance toward a development approach to migration. In this article, we propose to retrospectively look back at how the Jordanian government changed its approach to hosting the Syrian population, considering also how this country has been shaped through previous waves of refugees from neighbouring countries. Zooming into the effects of the Syrian conflict, we look at how the Jordanian government — faced with a series of challenges such as popular discontent, the strain on its own resources, and security threats — modified its strategy throughout the years, shifting towards a more "development" approach.<sup>3</sup>

This article emphasizes the importance of considering historical events and the current socio-economic landscape of host countries when examining the migration-development *nexus*. The majority of refugees come from the Global South and remain there, hosted in other countries in the South (Betts, 2010). It is therefore key to study how these countries deal with refugee populations.

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3 While we acknowledge the role of subnational actors in mediating the implementation of refugee policies in host countries, such as municipalities (Betts *et al.*, 2021), our research further questions the strategies these hosting governments deploy.

This article is structured as follows: after describing the methodology (see Box 1), it provides an overview of Jordan's contemporary history in hosting refugees. The subsequent sections delve into various facets of the Government of Jordan's (GoJ) policies towards Syrian refugees from 2011 to the present day. This exploration includes an investigation into the decisions regarding the establishment of refugee camps, an assessment of the impact of security concerns, and an examination of the influence of economic agreements with international partners on the refugee population. The article concludes with a discussion of the multifaceted factors that underpinned GoJ's policy decisions concerning the hosting of Syrian refugees.

### **Box 1: Methodology**

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The study draws upon the conceptual framework provided by the MAGYC (Migration Governance and Asylum Crises) project, funded by the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, which seeks to assess how migration governance has been influenced by recent refugee crises and how crises shape policy responses on migration. Jordan, hosting the second-highest share of refugees per capita in the world, is one of the focal points of the MAGYC project, and the case of Jordan's response to the Syrian crisis from 2011 to 2023 is examined through it and subsequently outlined and discussed in this paper. The study mobilizes an exhaustive inventory through a collective database of ninety components encompassing government decisions, drafts of legislation, and news articles related to historical events, all meticulously explored in chronological order. Additionally, it incorporates grey literature and twenty-five official correspondences disclosed between government officials and the UN. This repository is made accessible through the website ([www.refgov.net](http://www.refgov.net)), housing a database encompassing decisions, testimonials, reports, official documents, and correspondence that were further reflected and discussed in this paper by analysing and comparing Jordan's policy responses in light of the Syrian refugee crisis. To enrich the analysis presented in this paper and to deepen the understanding of policy decisions and their execution, the authors supplemented the data through follow-up interviews with the UNHCR Jordan spokesperson and in-depth interviews with four Syrian refugees, who shared detailed narratives of their journeys from Syria to Jordan. The refugees' semi-structured interviews told their stories of fleeing the Syrian war, passing through neighbouring villages, and eventually reaching the Jordanian border. While certain data obtained from the interviews was directly quoted, others were used to explore additional resources from literature, official government statements, and information from the United Nations to support the narrative. The search strictly applied ethical considerations, including obtaining informed consent from interviewees, ensuring the confidentiality, safety, and anonymity of participants, and adhering to ethical guidelines for research involving vulnerable populations, such as refugees. Accordingly, all personal details, including names, villages, and origins, were carefully omitted from the collected data. The collected data is subjected to qualitative analysis techniques, while the discussion incorporates quantitative data presented in figures. Thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the narratives of Syrian refugees. Moreover, government decisions and policy shifts are analysed within a retrospective framework to understand their motivations and implications. The study's retrospective design and the volume of historical data available are among the potential limitations acknowledged by the authors.

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## When Development Meets Migration: Framing the Hosting of Refugees for Governance

Drawing on insights from migration studies, migration-development dynamics can be comprehended by considering the reciprocity between, on the one hand, the migratory trajectories of refugees and, on the other hand, the broader macro and local development contexts (Nyberg-Sørensen *et al.*, 2002; de Haas, 2010). In this context, the interconnection between migration and development has gained traction, advocating to examine the potential economic growth stemming from migration processes and other subsistence perspectives stemming from development approaches, such as transnational remittances (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1995; de Haas, 2010). The migration-development *nexus* framework highlights the interdependence between the migration process and the local development context of both the sending and receiving countries, which is affected by the broader macro-level development context (de Haas, 2010). This frame of thought influenced European states' policies to tackle refugee-related issues through the lens of "co-development" since the 2000s (Pastore, 2007). This approach mainly considers transnational migrants to be assets of development for their home country through remittances (Glick Schiller, 2018). It thus depends on the possibility for refugees to work in the host country.

The migration-development *nexus* mainly conceives "development" in economic terms, although more broadly, development is a multifold process that seeks to address structural issues through social, political, economic, and institutional concerted efforts (de Haas, 2010). Initially, development was conceived as the outcome of a linear process in which economic growth would ultimately ensure the governed population an enhanced living standard (Desai, 2012). Today's development approach is mainly driven by neoliberal economics (Fisher, 1997). These pro-market policies, in conjunction with reduced state intervention, are regarded as effective mechanisms for promoting a country's economic development (Atlani-Duault, 2005).

At the crossroad between migration and development resides the refugee policies in place in the host country, policies made to respond to an emergency, yet often lasting due to long-term protracted conflicts (Nyberg-Sørensen *et al.*, 2002). As most refugees come from countries from the Global South and are hosted by countries from the South as well (Betts, 2010), we examine the literature on host countries with limited economic resources. The development of refugee policies by host countries is not done in a vacuum but is rather the result of several factors that influence how policies are shaped over time.

Jacobsen (1996), in her seminal article, identified four crucial factors that influence the formulation of refugee policies by policymakers in low-income host countries: 1) the bureaucratic and administrative structure of the host country's government; 2) the economic capacity and willingness of the host community to accommodate incoming refugees; 3) potential security concerns; and 4) the host country's relations with foreign actors. First, the pre-existing legal and institutional framework in place prior to the refugee influx significantly shapes the host government's ability to respond to the crisis within its borders. It determines which authority will take responsibility for the matter. For example, the response may differ if managed by the Ministry

of Social Development or the Ministry of National Security, as it influences the perception and treatment of incoming refugees. Second, refugee policies are contingent on the host community's capacity to receive and support displaced individuals. Factors such as the host country's economic situation and the local community's perception and willingness to accommodate refugees significantly impact policy decisions. Third, Jacobsen underscores how mass refugee inflows can pose security threats to the host country. For instance, refugee camps may inadvertently shelter militia groups, or refugees can be potential targets for attacks. The presence of refugees on the host country's territory can also lead to competition with local communities, fostering a sense of unfairness that may result in public protests and strikes. These events can undermine the legitimacy of the incumbent government.

Fourth and finally, the nature of a refugee crisis is inherently transnational, triggered by conflicts in other countries that force masses of people to cross borders. Consequently, domestic refugee policies are inherently tied to geopolitical considerations. Additionally, refugee policies can be influenced by what Jacobsen terms the "international refugee regime." This regime encompasses international organizations like the UNHCR, mandated with refugee protection, and international legal frameworks, including conventions. It serves the dual role of providing practical support, such as financial aid and infrastructure, and establishing normative standards, ensuring that the host government complies with international conventions. Building on this emphasis on the host country's relationship with international actors, recent research highlighted how host countries have been mobilizing the issue of refugees on their territory as a diplomatic strategy. Termed as "migration diplomacy," this approach is characteristic of host states that "use [...] diplomatic tools, processes, and procedures to manage cross-border population mobility" (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019: 115).

When examining the Jordanian regime's hosting of Syrian refugees, the concept of "migration diplomacy" provides valuable insights into the Kingdom's diplomatic relations with foreign partners and its diplomatic strategies that enable the negotiation of a "refugee rent." Tsourapas (2019: 467) defines a refugee rentier state as "a state that hosts forcibly displaced population group(s) and relies financially on external income linked to its treatment of these group(s)." Therefore, a refugee rent is that external income that can "come from international organizations or third states in a variety of forms, including direct economic aid or grants, debt relief, preferential trade treatment, and so on" (Tsourapas, 2019: 467). Jordan's heavy dependence on foreign aid is a crucial aspect of this dynamic, with some researchers contending that hosting refugees is contingent on the receipt of such aid (Kelberer, 2017; Kumaraswamy, 2019; Freier *et al.*, 2021). Over time, the country has strategically developed mechanisms to maximize the benefits derived from providing international aid to refugees (Kelberer, 2017; Tsourapas, 2019; Freier *et al.*, 2021). Drawing on Jordan's historical role as both a "refugee host" and a "rentier state" (Knowles, 2005), Kelberer (2017) characterized Jordan as a "refugee rentier" state, which consists of hosting refugees as a mechanism to seek international rent. Researchers have observed this strategy of collecting a rent in the form of international aid for hosting refugees in countries other than Jordan (Tsourapas, 2019; Freier *et al.*, 2021). Various states engage in this form of "refugee rent-seeking behavior" within their diplomatic relations, effectively transforming refugees into a resource for the host country's

economic development (Tsourapas, 2019). This, in turn, leads to the “commodification” of refugees as an economic incentive for these states (Freier *et al.*, 2021).

This review of the state of the art provides insights into the multifaceted factors that underpin the development of refugee policies in host countries, particularly in the Global South. In a nutshell, considering the literature, understanding the unfolding of a host country’s refugee policy lies on a complex balance between their socio-economic capacity to host, the country’s administrative structure, the country’s perception of security threats, and its diplomatic relationships, including its diplomatic negotiation to secure a rent from international aid actors.

Prior theoretical frameworks have emphasized the paramount role of economic factors in shaping refugee policy. Notwithstanding the importance of this element, our archival research and our historical perspective enables us to propose that we consider the legacy of past events and policies in the making of refugee policies (Lenner, 2020). Past experiences with refugee influxes also inform contemporary responses to ongoing refugee crises. This factor, in a reciprocal relationship, significantly influences the policies that, in turn, govern the experiences of refugees. In this article, we delve into the Jordanian government’s policy evolution to analyse how it has undertaken the governance of the incoming Syrian population within its borders.

## **Context: Past Jordanian Responses to the Waves of Refugee Inflow**

Jordan has a long history of hosting refugees on its territory. It can be traced back to the 19th century Ottoman Empire, when Chechens and Circassians found asylum from Russians and Anatolia (Kelberer, 2017). The country’s recent evolution is intimately intertwined in opposition to the events occurring on its western border. Following the creation of Israel in 1948 after the “Nakbah” (referring to the forced displacement and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs) and only two years after the independence of Jordan, it is estimated that 100,000 Palestinian refugees sought protection across the Jordan River (Achilli, 2014). In 1951, the Jordanian regime annexed the West Bank. The Palestinian refugees were then welcomed onto Jordanian territory as one of them, while camps were set up temporarily with the regime’s aim of integrating them rapidly (Achilli, 2014). It is important to note that Jordan has never signed the 1951 Geneva Convention and thus does not officially recognize the status of “refugee”. Jordan rather hosts refugees as “guests” or “hosts” (Içduygu and Nimer, 2020: 148). In the period that followed, this strategy implied that the inhabitants of the West Bank could claim Jordanian citizenship following an inclusive integration of both the West and the East Banks (Nanes, 2010). However, this welcoming attitude did not last.

Following the 1967 Six-Day War, a second influx of Palestinians landed in Jordan, and this time, while still wanting to keep its ties with the West Bank, the regime was facing more severe demographic and geopolitical constraints (Achilli, 2014). Besides, the 1960s were characterized by the rise of a “Palestinian national consciousness” leading to the creation of revolutionary organizations such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which, in the wake of the

defeat of the Six-Day War, settled in the Palestinian camps in Jordan (Achilli, 2014: 238). The militants (*fedayeen*) established a parallel governing system in the camps with their own military authorities in parallel to Jordanian authorities, which the Jordanian government came to see as threatening. Eventually, in September 1970, tensions between the Palestinian military groups and the Jordanian army led to a civil war, known as “Black September” which ended with the expulsion of the PLO to Lebanon (Achilli, 2014). That event changed the way the Jordanian government perceived and hosted refugees in the following influxes of displaced people from neighbouring countries.

A first influx of Iraqi refugees followed the 1991 Gulf War. While as in 1948 and 1967, Jordan had built refugee camps to host Palestinians, the 1991 influx of Iraqi refugees was managed in a completely different manner. Fearing that camps could potentially be the nest of new hurdles and adversity, like during the Black September in 1970-1971, Jordan shifted its governance of refugees. It adopted a refugee policy that forbade the establishment of camps, encouraging the refugees to “settle among the local population” while also granting them access to public schools and to the health care system (Kelberer, 2017). What stance did the Jordanian government hold at the beginning of the Syrian civil war and the influx of refugees within its borders? In the following sections, we dive into these policy decisions.

However, before proceeding, it is key to highlight that Jordan’s economy is fragile. Besides potash and phosphate, the country does not have much natural resources. It relies on the importation of both natural resources and consumer goods. In 2017, the country’s economy was predominantly based on the service and manufacturing sectors, with services contributing 66.6% to its gross domestic product (GDP), industries making up 28.8%, and agriculture accounting for 4.5% (The World Factbook, 2022). The market is not able to absorb the demand for employment. The country’s unemployment rate among young women and men (aged between fifteen and twenty-four) has varied between 28% and 35% since 1995 (World Bank, 2022).

## **The Unfolding of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan: Towards the Containment of the Influx of Refugees**

March 15, 2011 marks the beginning of the Syrian civil war. The situation in Syria deteriorated from a revolt to a civil war in a wave of uprisings that occurred during what is known as the “Arab Spring”. As a result of the uprising, the administration of President Bashar al-Assad, who has ruled Syria since 2000 without offering any political or social changes, repressed residents (Žuber and Moussa, 2018). Consequently, a massive number of Syrians sought refuge in neighbouring countries, including Jordan, through the 362 kilometres-long Jordanian/Syrian borders. Jordan thereby became the third highest country in the world for hosting Syrian refugees.

At first, the Jordanian government had an open-door policy, keeping their borders open, as was already the case prior to the Syrian conflict. Indeed, Jordan and Syria had established “bilateral treaties [...] permitting reciprocal freedom

of movement and work permits” prior to the Syrian conflict (Içduygu and Nimer, 2020: 418). Therefore, at the onset of the Syrian uprising, and building on previous experiences with other influxes of refugees, the Jordanian approach to the influx of refugees was mostly hands-off, letting Syrians enter the country as they used to in the past.

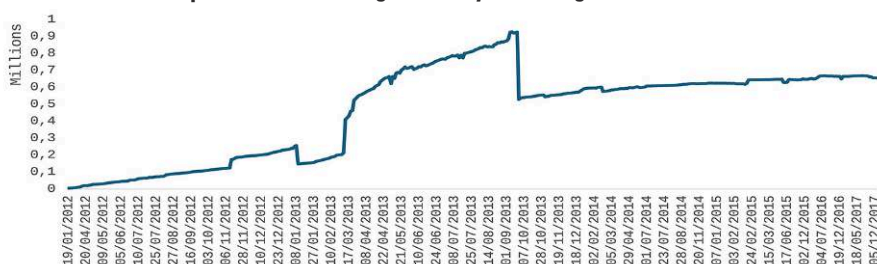
A shift occurred in mid-2012, more than a year into the conflict, when new laws were instituted that endorsed encampments over rural settlements. Jordan opened the Zaatari refugee camp in 2012, the second largest refugee camp in the world, located in the northern Jordanian city of Mafraq. With expectations of a successive and massive refugee influx, the camp grew quickly from a collection of tents to a 76,000-person urban metropolis, later reaching up to 156,000 refugees in March 2013 (Tsourapas, 2019: 469). In collaboration with governmental, national, and international nongovernmental organizations, the UNHCR and the Jordanian government ran the camp (UNHCR, 2020). Approaching the end of 2012, the Jordanian government opened the King Abdullah Park (KAP) refugee camp located in the Irbid governorate, Ramtha, offering limited space and resources to refugees. Turner (2015) argues that the encampment of masses has strategically brought up more attention to the issue on Jordanian territory.

As the number of refugees increased, the great majority (about 80%) remained nonetheless in urban, peri-urban, and rural regions, despite the encampment policy. And host communities were impacted (UNHCR, 2020). Basic public services and infrastructure rapidly became overstressed, exacerbating pre-existing challenges (Kumaraswamy and Singh, 2017). Besides, the fact that refugees settled in cities and villages and not in camps generated heated tensions between the local community members and the newcomers as it put additional strain on scarce resources and jobs. Host communities often asserted that Syrian refugees had been significantly encroaching on job opportunities that might otherwise have gone to Jordanians, even if statistics and studies have rather shown that those most affected by the arrival of Syrians in the labour market were worker migrants like Egyptians and South East Asians (Sahin Mencutek and Nashwan, 2021).

In March 2013, UNHCR announced that the registered Syrian refugees in Jordan had reached 289,268 as they were settled almost evenly across rural areas and refugee camps (UNHCR, 2023). The number of Syrian refugees entering Jordan doubled over the same year, increasing significantly by more than 570,000 settled mostly in rural areas (see Graph 1). This increase coincided with the Jordanian government’s decision to establish the Syrian Refugee Camp Directorate (SRCD) to manage the situation of refugees in camps, which was later replaced by the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD) to include refugees settled in urban, pre-urban, and rural populations, which constitute the majority.



**Graph 1: Number of Registered Syrian Refugees, 2012-2017**



Source: UNHCR Operational Data (2023).

### **Building More Refugee Camps: An Ongoing Traditional Emergency Response**

During the unstructured settling of the majority of refugees outside of the camps, the Jordanian government opted to provide a more regulated hosting environment by establishing additional refugee camps in various regions around Jordan, despite the previous negative experiences with militia groups in camps in the 1960s as mentioned above.

Following the establishment of the Zaatari and the King Abdullah Park (KAP) refugee camps in 2012, a United Arab Emirates-funded refugee camp opened in April 2013 in Mrajeeb Al Fhood. The Emirati Red Crescent Society administered the camp, which had a capacity to house 25,000 people in trailers, located about thirty-seven kilometers from the border (Associated Press, 2013). A year later, in 2014, the Jordanian government, in partnership with the UNHCR, established the Azraq refugee camp, the second largest after Zaatari, in the northeast of the country.

The Azraq camp is uniquely designed to host refugees in six separate villages, apart from each other. Each village is divided into districts and then into plots that contain a similar set of shelters. UNHCR reasoned that the new village-based approach of planning aimed to foster a greater sense of ownership and community among residents (UNHCR, 2021). They considered the camp’s design was informed by novel strategies and lessons learned from previous experiences in the Zaatari refugee camp. The camp that is promoted as “one of the best refugee camps in the world” (Oddone, 2014), has many opponents who believe that its planning strategies contributed to excessive control over its inhabitants (Awamleh and Dorai, 2023), and prioritized easing the work for the humanitarian actors and security over the refugees’ quality of life (Hoffmann, 2017). This encampment strategy, which is rooted back to the Palestinian refugee camps, has proposed a governance model that is based primarily on counterinsurgency, where everyone is a potential suspect. It is described by some activists as a plague-strike colony from the Middle Ages (Hanafi, 2010).

## **Fragmented Encampment Solutions: Terror and Geopolitical Deadlock**

Jordan had an open policy of travel and trading through its borders with Syria before the war. However, since 2011, there have been significant changes in the border crossing point's administration, particularly with regard to Syrians who are seeking refuge in the country. This section will outline the border closures, discuss the policies behind them, and identify the shift in border management towards a series of closures that replaced the Kingdom's earlier open-door policy. In-depth interviews were conducted with four Syrian refugees, who were asked to narrate the details of their journey from Syria to Jordan. We use the interviews to illustrate how the changes in policies have impacted the refugee journey to Jordan. The abbreviation (S.R.) is being used to refer to the interviewees in order to protect their anonymity.

Along with an initial welcoming policy for Syrian refugees on Jordanian land, the two official border crossings — Daraa and Nasib — as well as a number of unofficial crossings nearby, allowed refugees from Syria to seek refuge in Jordan during the beginning of the conflict. But in the middle of 2013, crossing borders to Jordan became less easy as the Jordanian government decided to close all unofficial border crossings, which led to the start of a series of restrictions on entering the Jordanian territory (Francis, 2015). A (S.R.) described the situation in Daraa:

*"Daraa was a very poor village! Many Syrians from various regions had gathered there in an effort to cross the border into Jordan, yet we found that Jordan was not allowing access to any refugees from this crossing point. People suffered from hunger, and the only thing we could buy was cheese. This was due to the lack of food and the extremely high prices. One chicken I remember cost sixty USD! At that time, everyone had lost a lot of weight. I looked like a skeleton with forty kilograms."* (Interview, S.R., 2022)

As a consequence of the 2013 closure, refugees were forced to travel hundreds of kilometers in the desert and in active conflict areas to seek refuge in Jordan through official crossing points (Human Rights Watch, 2015). An interviewee commented:

*"The journey was very long and dangerous. It took us three days to arrive under some devastating conditions, war, bombings, and airforce. We were transported via trucks that are used to carry sheep. We were in very poor conditions; hungry, sick, and barefoot."* (Interview, S.R., 2022)

Emergency medical cases were still allowed access to seek treatment in Jordan following the 2012 decision to establish a medical evacuation procedure. This was set up by the Jordanian government, international organizations, and organizations connected to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an armed opposition group in Syria, to enable those injured in battle and civilians to receive emergency medical care in Jordan (Jordan Times, 2015).

In July 2014, the Jordanian authorities applied new restrictions on entry for Syrian refugees through all eastern border crossings. Syrian refugees were forced to remain at the Jordanian limit of a border zone between Syria and Jordan called "the Berm"; which is literally a raised barrier of sand located in the "Rukban" area.

*"We heard that the Rukban crossing border point was open, so we decided to try to enter Jordan from this point. Bedouin sheep vehicles were the only transportation means to reach Rukban. It cost \$100 per person, and the people who didn't have money had no option other than to stay in Daraa."* (Interview, S.R., 2022)

Nearly 4,000 Syrians were stranded at the borders, left without essential aid, when the restrictions resulted in irregular access to UN relief agencies and several international organizations (Williams, 2014). Later in December, the Jordanian government decided to reopen the eastern border crossings for Syrian refugees. It did not take too long to announce another partial closure in 2015, again at the eastern border crossing with permitted relief access.

*"After a long journey, we were shocked to learn that our hope to cross the borders and seek help was destroyed as the Jordanian government decided to close the Rukban crossing point. The Bedouins took the money from us and left us with around 500 people stranded alone in the desert without any shelter or basic living essentials. A few days later, we faced a huge sandstorm that left us helpless. People were panicking. We had difficulty breathing, nil visibility, and sand getting trapped in our nose, mouth, and eyes. Babies were crying, and we could not protect ourselves from the sandstorm since we had no tents or shelters to hide in."* (Interview, S.R., 2022)

The Rukban refugee camp represented a geopolitical deadlock in the midst of the Syrian crisis in Jordan. This camp came into existence as a result of the gathering of refugees fleeing Syria who ended up at the arid no-man's land at the intersection of the Jordanian, Syrian, and Iraqi territories in 2014 (Kayyali, 2017). More than 10,000 refugees settled there in a space that was very inhospitable for people to live in, in the absence of organized aid campaigns across the borders.

*"I observed people literally perish from starvation and illness caused by the intense sun rays."* (Interview, S.R., 2022)

The dire situation at the Rukban camp did not go unnoticed. Concurrently with the border closures, the Jordanian prime minister, Abdullah Ensor, announced during the third International Pledging Conference for Syria in Kuwait that the number of Syrian refugees had exceeded Jordan's capacity to respond, implying that international donors should support Jordanian development strategies as a response to the Syrian refugee crisis (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Human Rights Watch added that other countries should also share responsibility for hosting Syrian refugees. UNHCR also made requisitions to non-Middle Eastern countries to initiate resettlement programs for Syrian refugees in their nations, as they were only able to take in 2% of the total number of refugees through 2015. According to Houry, the deputy Middle East and North Africa director for Human Rights Watch, "Each Syrian stuck in the desert is a testament to the failure of the critically needed international refugee response [...] But leaving desperate people in a desert border zone is not the answer" (Westcott, 2015).

The border policies changed again in 2016, after the tragic attack in the informal Rukban camp. A terrorist attack left six Jordanian army personnel dead and fourteen injured. The authorities suspected some Syrian refugees of having potential ties with ISIS. Consequently, the area was declared a closed military zone, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to lock down the borders with

Syria (Ghazal, 2016), a decision that was heavily criticized by humanitarian organizations and the international community (Black, 2016). The government's decision was accused of putting the refugees' lives at risk, while putting in place adequate reception and screening procedures would have addressed their security concerns. The Jordanian administration also refused to provide aid across its borders to Rukban, which marks a journey of ongoing misery and evasion of responsibilities between nations to a camp that hosted, at its peak, nearly 60,000 refugees. As a result, UN agencies operating in Syria were given "a theoretical responsibility" for delivering aid to Rukban. However, because the Syrian regime controlled the capital of the country, where humanitarian organizations are situated, most of the aid was unable to reach the Rukban refugee camp. The thirty-five-kilometer distance between the Rukban camp and a US military base made it more challenging to bring aid. The US-base authorities thought that providing supplies to the camp would take the focus away from the military mission, while they were accused by Russia of using the refugees as "human shields" to protect their opposition forces (Sennett, 2020).

As the burden of responsibility shifted among countries, the prevention of aid lifelines due to the regime, the military forces engaged in the war, and the Jordanian blockage, the camp was suffering from a protracted crisis of excessive hunger and the absence of basic humanitarian aid. Situated in the desert, where children and infants lose their lives due to the drastic weather conditions and the spread of diseases (Edwards and al-Homsi, 2020), there has not been a supply of aid to the camp in years (Christou, 2022). The United Nations last managed to deliver aid in late 2019.

### **A Shift from Humanitarian to Development Response: A Path Paved with Good Intentions**

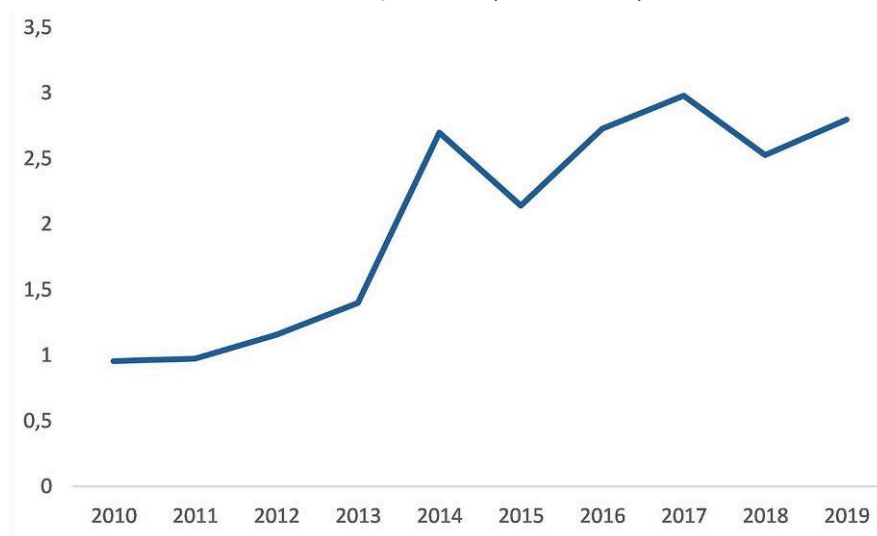
The UNDP and the UNHCR launched the first response strategy in December 2012 with the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), which consists of a regional mechanism with five hosting countries: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Combining both humanitarian and development approaches to respond to the needs of refugees and host communities, the 3RP's stakeholders have developed country-specific response plans. The refugee component addresses the needs of refugees for protection and humanitarian assistance, whereas the resilience component addresses the needs of impacted individuals, communities, and institutions for resilience, stabilization, and development, with the objective of enhancing the capacities of national actors. Following Jordan's participation in the 3RP, in 2014, the Jordanian government established the Host Community Support Platform (HCSP) and the National Resilience Plan (NRP), a three-year program of high-priority investments by the Jordanian government in cooperation with the UN and other NGOs. The program aimed to identify the dual nature of challenges to building resilience and strengthening social cohesion and to address the impacts of the crisis on Jordanian host communities (REACH, 2014).

The Syrian refugee crisis marks the establishment of Jordanian structured governance of refugee influx. This structured response resulted from the realization that the 1998 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Jordan and the UNHCR was insufficient to replace Jordan's disapproval of the 1967 Geneva Convention regarding the status

of refugees (Beaujouan and Rasheed, 2020). Approaching the end of a crowded year of decisions in 2014, Jordan began the establishment of the “Jordan Response Plan” (JRP), a series of financial models of partnership through interventions between the host country and the international community. The JRP is seen as the nationally-led country strategy that came as a consequence of the 3RP (3RP, 2019).

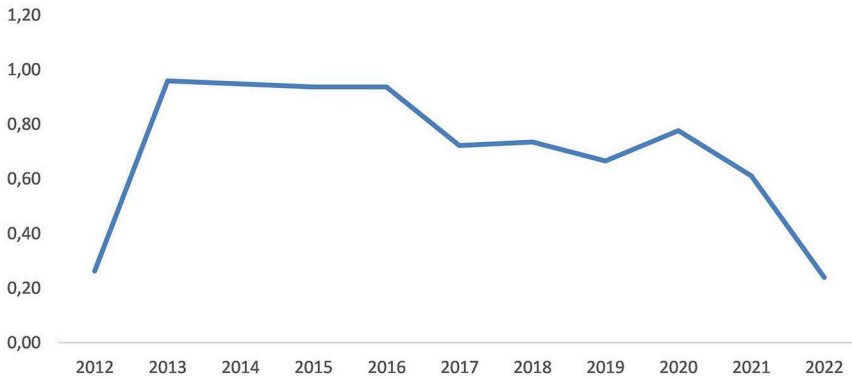
Through collaboration with more than 150 local, national, and international partners, the government of Jordan presented the “Jordan Response Plan” (JRP) as the highlight of their efforts towards a development governance strategy. The government promotes the JRP as the only national comprehensive plan through which the international community provides financial support to respond to the Syrian crisis, and it presents a yearly program to embed the refugee crisis response into “development-oriented” programs with sustainable goals for both the refugees and the host communities (MoPIC, 2015). The shift to a development approach is thus explicitly acknowledged in the policy published in 2015, leading the government to establish a series of mechanisms to integrate Syrian refugees into the economy of the Kingdom. A definite step in the direction of a development strategy followed the spike in the numbers of Syrian refugees coming to Jordan at the end of 2013 and early 2014. As mentioned above, between March and September 2013, the number of Syrians seeking refuge more than doubled (UNHCR, 2023). The shift is also apparent in the different types of funding channelled to the country. The graphs below present the flow of Official development assistance (ODA) and the flow of humanitarian funding Jordan has received between 2010 and 2019. It clearly shows how ODA fluctuates along with the humanitarian crisis.

**Graph 2: Net Official Development Assistance Received (Current USD) for Jordan, 2010-2019 (in Billion USD)**



Source: World Bank (2020).

**Graph 3: Humanitarian Funding Reported, Jordan, 2012-2022 (in Billion USD)**



Source: OCHA (2020).

Graph 2 shows an increase in development funding since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, whereas Graph 3 shows a decrease in humanitarian funding since 2016. Put together, Graphs 2 and 3 support the hypothesis that the general orientation of aid in Jordan is shifting from humanitarian response to a more development approach.

After the first Gulf War, the incoming Iraqi refugees “led to a major shift in the international community’s presence in Jordan” (Kelberer, 2017: 151). This influx of refugees was coupled with the arrival of humanitarian organizations to reduce the strain placed on national services. Amman, the capital, hosts several humanitarian and development international agencies and, throughout the years affected by conflicts in neighbouring countries, has become a hub in the region for international organizations and UN agencies (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2009). Between 2010 and 2013, incoming humanitarian funding to Jordan jumped from \$52 million to more than \$958 million USD (OCHA, 2020). Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and UN agencies have cemented their presence in the country with support from international funding, Jordan becoming the “de facto regional hub for Syria humanitarian operations” (Sida *et al.*, 2016).

Looking at the patterns of foreign funding, Kelberer (2017) shows how the Jordanian regime has grown skillful in negotiating direct state funding from the UNHCR or the World Bank in exchange for more flexible refugee policies. At the 2016 London Conference, Jordan’s statement shifted the narrative of the Syrian crisis from a purely humanitarian crisis to a development concern of host countries, framing the crisis as a “developmental disaster” (Kelberer, 2017: 154). In all its public interventions, the regime insists on the burden that hosting refugees represents while also emphasizing that Jordan needs direct support for its own population as well. Even if Jordan is classified as an upper middle-income country by the World Bank, it keeps receiving important sums of international assistance.

Nevertheless, Jordan continued building new refugee camps that represent an emergency response to the refugee crisis despite the new “development” approach of governance. This strategy was used consciously in order to attract the attention of the international community (Turner, 2015). Building more refugee camps made the Syrian crisis visible to donors, unlike the previous Iraqi refugee crisis back in the 2000s (Betts *et al.*, 2017).

If we conceptualize development as an economic empowerment strategy, it becomes evident that the economic integration of the refugee population presents a compelling and pragmatic way forward. This is at least the stance that economic agreements between the European Union and Jordan adopted. Based on an agreement between the World Bank, the European Union, and the Jordanian government in 2016, the Jordan Compact was signed with two main objectives. The first is to provide economic support to the host communities, and the second is to responsabilize the refugees, both through the promotion of investments and job opportunities. This is an economically sound decision that some people interpreted as Jordan using a humanitarian crisis as a chance to advance the receiving nation (Sahin Mencutek and Nashwan, 2021). The Compact does not only advocate for the integration of Syrian into the labour market, but also includes the simplifying of rules of origins for better trade opportunities with the EU which would theoretically benefit the whole Jordanian economy by attracting investments (Tsourapas, 2019).

The Compact led to the integration of the Syrian refugees into the Jordanian formal job market, specifically into the garment exportation factories and the construction sector (Kridis, 2021; Sahin Mencutek and Nashwan, 2021: 622). In light of this, the Ministry of Labour issued 230,000 work permits in particular fields, and according to predetermined quotas for the Syrian refugees by 2021 (Stave *et al.*, 2021), nearly half of them were free of charge. Since the Compact, it has been easier to get work permits for Syrian refugees. Administrative procedures have become less cumbersome as the government facilitates issuing work permits in one day, compared to fourteen days before. According to the Compact, companies get compensation for Syrians’ salaries, which further incentivizes them to employ refugees. Additionally, Syrian investors were also able to obtain permanent residency or Jordanian citizenship according to Investment Law No. 30 for 2014. This law gave Syrian investors the freedom to travel to and within the kingdom as well as the ability to own businesses, cars, and real estate. Obtaining these privileges allowed the Syrian investors to move their businesses to Jordan and to frequently employ other Syrian refugees in accordance with the Compact.

It is difficult to assess the impact these policies have had for Syrian refugees in Jordan. The statistics for 2018 showed that the unemployment rates among refugees have fallen from about 60% to about 8% (Stave *et al.*, 2021). However, the Jordanian government noticed an increase in the unemployment rate among its citizens, reaching 47.2% in the fourth quarter of 2022. Consequently, the government of Jordan announced a new Investment Environment Law No. 21 in April 2023 that forbids non-Jordanians from working in a long list of professions, including those requiring labour in the administrative, industrial, and handcrafts sectors (Mustafa, 2023), while maintaining their subscription to the Jordanian social security system. These recent decisions might directly impact Syrian refugees.

## What Refugee Policy? Discussion

The GoJ's refugee policy went through a series of changes since the start of the incoming of Syrian refugees into its borders. The adoption of an open-door policy towards its borders in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict in 2011 marked the beginning of a series of transformations in the management of the refugee crisis. These changes affected all levels of governance, including local, national, and international governments, corporations, and non-governmental organizations. The unexpectedly high influx of refugees compelled the government to establish massive refugee camps that resembled cities, collaborating with governmental and non-governmental partners like the UN and the Emirates. However, one could argue that the decision to establish additional refugee camps was not merely an impromptu emergency response but rather a well-planned strategy aimed at attracting attention from donors and the international community to the substantial refugee population in a country with limited resources.

It is worth noting that not all refugees settled in those camps. In reality, the majority of refugees (approximately 80%) chose to reside in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. Additional refugee camps were being established across the country while a chaotic settlement in urban and rural areas took place at the same time, despite the aspirations of shifting governance to the development mindset of more sustainable solutions. As the country began to experience strain on its resources, infrastructure, job opportunities, and services, tensions arose between the local Jordanians and the refugee population residing outside the camps. These challenges underscored the complex dynamics at play in managing the refugee crisis and the multifaceted impacts on both the refugees and the host communities.

However, it is crucial to consider the limitations of Jordan's hosting strategy and its ability to leverage international aid. The initial open-door policy underwent a significant shift when the Rukban terror attack resulted in the loss of Jordanian military personnel. As a response to the incident, the Jordanian government implemented firm border closures, which drew criticism and raised concerns among the international community and donors. Despite the controversy surrounding these stringent measures, the government appeared to prioritize national security over its rentier state strategy of hosting refugees. The decision to tighten border controls and impose strict closures reflected the government's determination to safeguard its national interests and protect its citizens. Balancing these conflicting priorities became a delicate task, requiring the government to navigate the complexities of managing the refugee crisis while ensuring its own stability and security.

In parallel, the Jordanian government implemented a series of financial partnership models involving more than 150 local, national, and international partners, exemplified by initiatives like the Jordan Response Platform for the Syria Crisis (JRPS) in 2014, the Jordan Response Plan (JRP) since 2015, and the Jordan Compact in 2016. These collaborative efforts provided significant incentives for the adoption and continuation of the development approach by the Jordanian government. A few positive outcomes resulting from these interventions were exemplified in this research, including simplified hiring processes for Syrian



refugees and a noticeable increase in job opportunities for this population. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the development approach also had unintended consequences. These initiatives tended to favour wealthier refugees who could afford to invest in businesses and secure residency in Jordan. This emphasis on supporting the economic integration of affluent refugees sometimes overshadowed the urgent needs of the most vulnerable individuals and families who required immediate assistance and protection.

In essence, it can be posited that the refugee governance of the Syrian crisis in Jordan involved a twofold strategy, implemented in a roughly concurrent manner. The evolution from camps to integration in a development framework did not follow a linear sequence; rather, it appears to have been strategically employed as a governance tool to attain political, economic, and humanitarian objectives. As a result, Jordan's historical experience in hosting refugees is characterized by a recurrent oscillation between encampment policies and integration through development programs, all of which occur within the complex landscape of social and economic challenges.

## Conclusion

A new shift in the regional governance of the Syrian refugee crisis towards repatriation of the refugees is looming as Arab countries begin to re-establish diplomatic ties with Syria. In April 2023, Jordan hosted a consultative meeting of the foreign ministries of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria to prioritize safe voluntary repatriation for the Syrian refugees. Although the Arab League had previously denounced Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime as engaging in "mass slaughter" and demanded accountability for its use of chemical weapons (Baker, 2023), al-Assad was warmly welcomed, and Syria was reinstated as a member of the League on May 7, 2023, twelve years after it had been suspended.

This recent diplomacy event regarding the Syrian repatriation and the varying degrees of readiness to normalize relations with the Syrian government raises questions about the destiny of the efforts that Jordan has made for the past twelve years in building massive refugee camps and establishing new laws, plans, and programs that are based on the presence of Syrian refugees on its lands. The question of whether the Syrian refugee crisis has become entirely politicized and whether international donors, governments, and NGOs should play a role or use leverage to bring stability, safety, and wellbeing, following twelve years of ongoing suffering, is still hanging.

In 2023, in alignment with the changing dynamics in refugee governance towards repatriation, the UNHCR indicated a significant decline of approximately 5,000 individuals within Jordan's Syrian refugee population. Starting from October, the United Nations in Jordan publicly announced resource constraints that would hinder their ability to sustain food assistance for refugees across the country. Simultaneously, the WFP revealed its own financial constraints, leading to a reduction in food aid provided to Syrian refugees in Jordan, even within refugee camps.

These developments herald a shifting paradigm in the governance of the Syrian refugee crisis, a perspective underscored by the unequivocal statement made by the Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs on September 7, 2023. In this statement, Jordan expressed its inability to accommodate additional Syrian refugees. Later in September, King Abdullah II of Jordan addressed the UN General Assembly in New York, saying that Syrian refugees' future is in their country, not in host countries. All these developments could be seen as efforts to exert pressure on refugees for their preparedness to return, which inevitably raises questions about the voluntariness of such repatriation to a country that is still perceived as unsafe for those who initially fled in search of a secure haven and renewed hope for a better life.

While Jordan's refugee governance of the Syrian crisis can be influenced by a wide range of political, economic, and humanitarian factors, there may be concerns that if Syrian refugees repatriate and the refugee crisis is resolved, Jordan may lose some of the financial and international support it receives. The desire to "keep the rent coming in" in the context of Jordan's handling of the Syrian refugee crisis can be interpreted as a motivation to maintain financial aid and support from international organizations and donors, taking into account that the country faces serious financial challenges and limited resources. However, this desire might also be indicative of a shortcoming in refugee governance. The lack of active consideration of the repatriation of Syrian refugees may be viewed as a misallocation of resources and a failure to recognize years of collective efforts by Jordan's government and international aid donors. Moreover, this may hinder the achievement of broader development goals, as refugee-related challenges persist and potentially worsen. The continued reliance on financial aid to sustain the refugee population without a clear plan for their return may lead to concerns among international aid donors, potentially affecting future aid commitments and partnerships.

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## **Zaid Awamleh and Alexandrine Dupras**

### **Hosting Syrian Refugees through the Development Lens: The Case of Jordan**

The Syrian civil war has led to more than 6.8 million people fleeing Syria. Jordan has received the biggest number of Syrian refugees per capita, after Lebanon. In this article, authors take a retrospective look at how the Jordanian government adopted a new approach for hosting the Syrian population within the context of social and economic challenges. The authors draw on an exhaustive inventory of historical events, government decisions, and other grey literature, combined with key informant interviews. This article emphasizes the importance of considering a country's legacy and the current socio-economic landscape when examining the migration-development *nexus*. The article contends that the evolution of refugees management from "camps" to "integration" through a development approach did not follow a linear sequence; rather, it appears to have been strategically employed as a governance tool to attain political, economic, and humanitarian stability.

### **L'accueil des réfugiés syriens sous l'angle du développement : le cas de la Jordanie**

Le soulèvement syrien a conduit plus de 6,8 millions de personnes à fuir leur pays. La Jordanie a accueilli le plus grand nombre de réfugiés syriens par habitant, après le Liban. Dans cet article, les auteurs portent un regard rétrospectif sur la manière avec laquelle le gouvernement jordanien a mis en place une nouvelle méthode d'accueil de la population syrienne dans un contexte de défis sociaux et économiques. Ils s'appuient sur un inventaire exhaustif d'événements historiques, de décisions gouvernementales et autres sources de littérature grise, ainsi que sur des entretiens avec des informateurs clés. Cet article souligne l'importance de prendre en compte l'héritage et le paysage socio-économique d'un pays lors de l'étude du lien migration-développement. L'article montre également que l'évolution de la gestion des réfugiés, de l'hébergement dans des camps jusqu'aux politiques d'intégration justifiées par une approche développementaliste, n'est pas linéaire ; il semble plutôt que cette évolution ait été mise en place comme une stratégie de bonne gouvernance pour atteindre une forme de stabilité politique, économique et humanitaire.

### **Acoger a los refugiados sirios desde la perspectiva del desarrollo: el caso de Jordania**

Más de 6.8 millones de personas han huido de su país como consecuencia de la guerra civil siria. Jordania ha recibido el segundo mayor número de refugiados sirios per cápita, después del Líbano. En este artículo, los autores examinan retrospectivamente cómo el gobierno jordano adaptó un nuevo enfoque para acoger a la población siria en el contexto de los retos sociales y económicos. Los autores se basan en un inventario exhaustivo de acontecimientos históricos, decisiones gubernamentales y otra literatura gris, combinada con entrevistas a informantes clave. Este artículo subraya la importancia de tener en cuenta el legado de un país y el panorama socioeconómico actual a la hora de examinar el nexo entre migración y desarrollo. El artículo sostiene que la evolución de la gestión de los refugiados desde el alojamiento en campamentos hasta las políticas de integración justificadas por un enfoque desarrollista no fue lineal, sino que parece haberse empleado estratégicamente como herramienta de gobierno para lograr una estabilidad política, económica y humanitaria.