



# Syrian refugee flows – and ebbs

by Marco Funk and Roderick Parkes

The large influx of Syrian refugees since mid-2015 has fuelled speculation about the precise routes taken by the newcomers on their way to the EU. One common assumption has been that the refugees are leaving camps in Jordan and Lebanon due to difficult conditions and moving on through Turkey into the EU.

In reality, it appears that Jordan and Lebanon are not the first steps on the refugees' paths to Europe. Instead, the conflict in Syria has moved northwards and is producing new refugees who head straight to Europe via Turkey. This has consequences for the EU's cooperation with the region, as well as its understanding of the motivations of those who are arriving.

## A shifting conflict

Over 635,000 Syrian refugees are officially registered in Jordan, and unofficial estimates place the figure as high as 1.4 million. Lebanon officially hosts just over 1 million refugees, with unofficial estimates totalling 1.5 million. These numbers reinforce the impression that the two countries (with populations of 6.5 and 4.5 million, respectively) are overwhelmed.

However, while it is certainly true that they are carrying a massive burden, there does not appear to be an 'overspill' moving on to Europe. Rather, it is the conflict in Syria which is migrating.

The EU has no reliable data on the routes taken by refugees before they enter Europe, and collects data only on their nationalities. Still, as the conflict in Syria moves northward, it can reasonably be presumed that this is producing new refugees. At the same time, existing refugee populations in Jordan are demonstrably returning to areas of southern Syria as these stabilise. At least 40% of the refugees in Jordan hail from southern Syria and, by December 2015, as many as 70-75 of them were leaving Jordan every day, de-registering with the army and with the UNHCR at Zaatari camp.

Conditions in southern Syria certainly remain difficult, and some of the returnees may conceivably be going back to Syria only with the intention of moving on up to Turkey and Europe. Nevertheless, rudimentary data about the motives of refugees suggests this is not the case. Informal polling in Jordan indicates that many refugees would be willing to settle back in Syria even if conditions were difficult. According to one recent poll, around 40% would be ready to go back to Syria with nothing more than a cease-fire in place, while up to 15% have attached no such conditions to their return.

The apparent drop in the numbers of refugees now heading south to Jordan reinforces the idea that most new refugees are primarily being produced in the north of Syria. The UNHCR in Jordan registered only 30,924 new entries in

2015 (compared to a total of 391,056 new arrivals for 2013 and 2014); by December, as few as 100-120 refugees were arriving there on a daily basis. As for Lebanon, the trends have become harder to discern after the government asked the UNHCR to stop registering new refugee arrivals in early 2015. But there too, flows do seem to have lessened significantly.

Indeed, local officials describe a general *lack* of mobility on the part of refugees in the region, be they the 80,000 Palestinian refugees who have left Syria and find themselves without options for onward travel, the 20% of Syrian refugees who have family in Jordan and are relying on precarious kinship structures, or the children reportedly being forced into work or marriage. But it is not only poor and vulnerable refugees who struggle to move on. Many asset-rich Syrians are unwilling to permanently leave their homeland, and cross the border only to deposit money or set up businesses.

They thus join the growing population becoming trapped inside southern Syria: Lebanon has largely closed off humanitarian channels from Syria, meaning that newcomers can stay for a six-month period of work (without health insurance) and must then go home. Syrian workers who had migrated to Jordan before the conflict began are facing a similar fate. They now find themselves priced out of the labour market by new waves of refugees with food and housing subsidies, and Jordan has expelled nearly 6,000 back to Syria as illegal immigrants.

## Rethinking the flows

Europe's general perception of the Syrian refugee flows currently does not quite reflect the reality. Media coverage in the EU tends to present a rather linear path from Syria to Jordan and Lebanon, then up through Turkey, Greece and the Balkans into central Europe. The newcomers are, moreover, thought to be the first of far greater numbers of refugees: they are assumed to be practising 'chain migration', a form of migration led by (largely male) migrants who settle in Europe and then seek reunification with family members left behind in refugee camps.

In reality, many appear to be coming from northern, government-controlled areas of Syria where the Assad-regime has introduced a policy of indiscriminate military conscription for young men. These newcomers are overwhelmingly male, but most are young and single, and thus unlikely to fit the 'chain migration' dynamic.

They mark a contrast to the refugees clustered across Jordan and Lebanon who still appear to consist of *complete* family units (with demographics evenly split between men and women, adults and children).

The difference in profile also makes it less likely that the Syrian refugees who have made it to Europe will return to Syria. They tend to be better educated, and are therefore more likely to succeed in 'starting from scratch'. In contrast, those who stay in the Middle East may lack the means or education to even attempt the journey: OECD data from 2014 suggested 14% of refugees in Lebanon were illiterate, and just 4% had a degree. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the refugees returning to Syria from Jordan and Lebanon are focusing on their day-to-day survival rather than following a strategy to ensure their long-term well-being.

## Dealing with trapped populations

Jordan and Lebanon may have a certain interest in encouraging the impression that their refugee population is en route to Europe. The two governments have noted how Turkey turned its position as a transit country into political leverage over the EU. However, in reality, Syrian refugees appear to be characterised above all by their lack of mobility. Meanwhile, the wealthy Gulf states and Israel have closed their borders to the Syrians who might seek safety there, but also for Eritreans and other Africans trying to reach Europe.

With refugees across the region trapped in this unsatisfactory limbo, it is hard to develop long-term policies geared either towards integration in the host countries or repatriation. Jordan and Lebanon thus risk 'sleepwalking' into fundamental social transformation. Aid programmes which were supposed to be temporary are, for example, leading to permanent changes. There are fears that ongoing food-aid programmes will inflate the region's agricultural sector, providing low-wage jobs that can only be filled by refugees, and putting strain on the region's water supplies and ageing infrastructure.

As a result of this complex situation, the EU's efforts in the region and at home may need to be mindful of counterintuitive realities and changing conflict dynamics.

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