



MAY 2026

Protracted Displacement in the Middle East and North Africa

Edited by Kelsey Norman, Ana Martín Gil, Ahmet İçduygu, and Müge Dalkıran

Contributions by Ruba Al Akash, Ibrahim Darwish, Josiane Matar, Watfa Najdi,
Najwa Belkziz, Duygu Altunoğlu Yıldız, Antea Enna, Ayat Nashwan,
Ahmet Gümüşbaş, Gerasimos Tsourapas, Imad El-Anis, and Rabeh Morrar



PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

May 2026

Series Editors

Kelsey Norman, Ph.D., Fellow for the Middle East, Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy; Director, Women's Rights, Human Rights, and Refugees Program

Ana Martín Gil, Research Manager, Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

Ahmet İçduygu, Ph.D., Professor, Departments of International Relations and Sociology, Koç University; Director, Migration Research Center (MiReKoc)

Müge Dalkıran, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Researcher, Migration Research Center (MiReKoc), Koç University



Contributors

Ruba Al Akash, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Yarmouk University, Jordan

Ibrahim Darwish, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Linguistics and Translation, Yarmouk University, Jordan; Director, Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Centre

Josiane Matar, Rhodes Scholar, Ph.D. Candidate in Migration Studies, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Wafra Najdi, Ph.D. Candidate in Development Studies, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

Najwa Belkziz, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer in Arts and Humanities, New York University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Duygu Altunoğlu Yıldız, Ph.D., Lecturer, Kırklareli University, Turkey

Antea Enna, Ph.D., MSCA Postdoctoral Fellow, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy; Visiting Fellow, Centre for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, Jordan

Ayat Nashwan, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Social Work, Yarmouk University, Jordan; Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Ahmet Gümüşbaş, Ph.D. Candidate in Law, KU Leuven, Belgium

Gerasimos Tsourapas, Ph.D., FAcSS, 125th Anniversary Chair and Professor of International Relations, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom; Honorary Research Fellow, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom; Editor-in-Chief, Migration Studies

Imad El-Anis, Ph.D., Associate Professor of International Relations; Director, Centre for Policy, Citizenship, and Society, Nottingham Trent University, United Kingdom

Rabeh Morrar, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Development Economics, An-Najah National University, Palestine; Director of Research, Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS)



PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Kelsey Norman, Ana Martín Gil, Ahmet İçduygu, and Müge Dalkıran

Around the world, refugee situations are increasingly protracted, with displacement lasting an average of 20 years for refugees and more than 10 years for most internally displaced persons (IDPs). As the prospect of returning to places of origin becomes unlikely, the needs of displaced populations evolve. Beyond immediate subsistence and shelter, people require long-term economic security and access to livelihoods, housing, education and health care, as well as legal protections — areas in which humanitarian organizations are not always equipped to operate effectively. Humanitarian funding structures are also not designed to address protracted displacement, as global attention shifts and support diminishes over time.

For decades, academics and practitioners have highlighted the mismatch between the reality of long-term displacement and the provision of short-term assistance, yet little has changed on the ground.¹ Despite global efforts to address the persistent underfunding and the hierarchical nature of humanitarian aid — such as the Grand Bargain in 2016 — displaced populations continue to experience the effects of a broken system.² Funding gaps have become even more pronounced, following the closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2025, which had previously been the largest donor of humanitarian assistance.³

Protracted displacement is particularly acute in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The presence of Syrian refugees, who fled the country's civil war, reshaped the region's displacement landscape over the past decade and a half, impacting the politics of neighboring countries, host communities, and

the lives of refugees themselves, as well as the way international aid is structured, negotiated, and delivered. Even after the fall of the Assad regime in late 2024, much remains uncertain about whether refugees and internally displaced Syrians will be willing and able to return home, with approximately 5.5 million individuals still displaced in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan.

More broadly across the region, continuing conflict in Yemen, which began in 2015, has resulted in 4.5 million people internally displaced and 21.6 million in need of humanitarian assistance.⁴ Following years of conflict with ISIS, Iraq still has an internally displaced population of more than a million people, many of whom are unable to return home or fully integrate into new communities, requiring more than humanitarian aid. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2023, Sudan has experienced the largest displacement crisis in the world but struggles to attract sufficient global attention and resources.⁵ Finally, Palestinians constitute the world's longest protracted refugee situation, compounded by the Israel-Hamas war that began in 2023 and destroyed the Gaza strip, forcing nearly two million individuals to flee their homes.⁶

To better understand protracted displacement in the MENA, this series of policy briefs draws on the research of scholars from across the region. The first set of briefs interrogates the political, social, and economic barriers that refugees face to integration in host countries. In Jordan, Ruba Al Akash and Ibrahim Darwish examine what protracted displacement looks like in everyday life for refugees from multiple nationalities, highlighting challenges such as limited access to formal employment, education, and property ownership. Similarly, Josiane Matar introduces the concept of pragmatic integration used by Syrian refugees in Lebanon to illustrate how repeated resilience strategies evolve into more permanent forms of social and economic embeddedness and notes that, in the absence of formal aid or state-led integration policies, refugees rely on each other and localized resource-sharing to survive. Also drawing on fieldwork in Lebanon, Watfa Najdi addresses the barriers that refugee-led organizations face and highlights the gap between localization rhetoric and actual practices in the provision of refugee-related funding.

Two briefs in the series evaluate durable solutions and complementary pathways for refugees. Najwa Belkziz argues that a locally adapted model of complementary pathways in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — a context where asylum and resettlement are unavailable — can expand understanding of the options available to refugees to fill protection gaps. In Turkey, Duygu Altunoğlu Yildiz examines the uneven availability of exceptional citizenship, a selective and discretionary pathway accessible only to a subset of displaced individuals from the MENA, and assesses the extent to which citizenship can deliver durable inclusion.

An additional two briefs consider the question of refugee return, traditionally considered the preferred durable solution by the United Nations. Antea Enna and Ayat Nashwan focus on the 1.5 generation of Syrian refugees in Jordan — those who fled during adolescence and have spent most of their lives in displacement — to explore whether their return aspirations differ from other groups. Ahmet Gümüşbaş argues that the restitution of property is a necessary condition for refugee return and evaluates the restoration of property rights in Syria after the fall of Assad. Drawing on experiences from Iraq and Bosnia, he advocates for the creation of a mass claims commission to facilitate a lasting return process.

The final two briefs examine the macro-level structures of aid, including how some countries leverage refugee hosting to extract domestic benefits and how aid delivery can be improved for displaced populations amid conflict. Gerasimos Tsourapas and Imad El-Anis introduce the term vulnerability diplomacy to describe how states use crisis narratives related to climate and displacement to secure external financial support. Drawing on the experiences of Egypt and Jordan — two countries with longstanding relationships with key international donors — they show that additional resources do not necessarily advance long-term resilience. Rabeh Morrar evaluates political and operational impediments to humanitarian aid delivery in Gaza, both historically and during the ongoing conflict, and argues for

context-sensitive practices that can improve outcomes for residents and aid practitioners alike.

Together, this series examines how governments, international humanitarian agencies, non-governmental organizations, and refugees themselves attempt to meet the needs of displaced peoples. It draws on research from specific local contexts to explore how traditional solutions to displacement — return, local integration, and resettlement — operate in practice and how these solutions sometimes fail to meet the needs of refugees in protracted situations. The series also proposes a range of new approaches, including reforms to existing aid structures, international diplomacy, informal integration, and complementary resettlement pathways. Ultimately, in a region facing both familiar and emerging displacement challenges, the series encourages discussion of how regional and global responses to refugees can continue to adapt and improve.

Acknowledgements

This compilation is based on the “Addressing Protracted Displacement in the MENA” workshop hosted at Koç University’s Migration Research Center (MiReKoc) in October 2025. Special thanks are extended to Murat Can Kaya, administrative coordinator at MiReKoc, for his logistical support. In addition to the authors, further thanks are offered to Ayselin Yıldız, faculty member and vice dean for research at Istinje University; Damla Aksel, associate professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Bahçeşehir University; and Sedef Turper, assistant professor of international relations at Koç University, for serving as discussants and providing feedback that enriched discussions of these critical topics. Karma Elbadawy, Bela Koshy, and Poema Sumrow, undergraduate students at Rice University, also provided invaluable editorial assistance. The workshop was funded with generous support from the Khudairi Group and the Kelly Day Endowment.

Series Editors

Kelsey Norman, Ph.D., is a fellow for the Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute and director of the Women's Rights, Human Rights, and Refugees Program. She is the author of "Reluctant Reception: Refugees, Migration and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa" (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and "Aiding Autocrats: Migration Management, Governance and Repression in Africa" with Nicholas Micinski (Cambridge University Press, 2026).

Ana Martín Gil is the research manager for the Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East at the Baker Institute. Her research focuses on migration, refugees, and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Mexico and Central America. Other research interests include foreign policy, sustainability, and climate change.

Ahmet İçduygu, Ph.D., is a professor at Koç University in the Department of International Relations and the Department of Sociology. He is also the director of the Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc). His main research and teaching focus on migration studies, theories and practices of citizenship, international organizations, civil society, nationalism and ethnicity, and research methods.

Müge Dalkıran, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral researcher at the Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc). She received her Ph.D. in area studies from Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara. Her research focuses on forced migration, migration and asylum policy, refugee protection, and human rights.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Crisp “Mind the Gap! UNHCR, Humanitarian Assistance and the Development Process,” *The International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 168–91, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2676057>.
2. Irwin Loy, “Why the Grand Bargain’s Future Hinges on Accountability,” *The New Humanitarian*, October 15, 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2024/10/15/why-grand-bargain-future-hinges-accountability>.
3. Sonali Korde, “Strengthening the Humanitarian Sector Brick by Brick,” Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, August 11, 2025, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/strengthening-humanitarian-sector-brick-brick>.
4. United Nations Yemen, “UNHCR: Displaced Yemenis Struggle Amidst Growing Needs in Prolonged Crisis,” August 16, 2024, <https://yemen.un.org/en/277315-unhcr-displaced-yemenis-struggle-amidst-growing-needs-prolonged-crisis#:~:text=With%204.5%20million%20people%20displaced,have%20endured%20years%20of%20conflict>.
5. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Sudan Situation Report,” October 27, 2024, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>.
6. Nathan Citino et al., “Generations of Palestinian Refugees Face Protracted Displacement and Dispossession,” *Migration Information Source*, Migration Policy Institute, May 3, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/palestinian-refugees-dispossession>.



RETHINKING PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT AND REFUGEE POLICY IN JORDAN

Ruba Al Akash and Ibrahim Darwish

Protracted displacement has become a defining feature of the contemporary refugee experience around the globe. It has left millions of people in limbo for years or even decades with insufficient opportunities to return home or build stable lives elsewhere.

Jordan offers a clear case of how these challenges unfold in practice. Since its inception, the country has hosted several successions of displacement including Palestinians, Iraqis, Syrians, Libyans, and Sudanese. Hosting refugees over decades has reshaped the country's social and demographic landscape, and placed significant pressure on public services, infrastructure, and the national economy.

As a result, Jordan's refugee response has progressed into a humanitarian network deeply dependent on external assistance. While international aid has helped sustain basic needs, the absence of long-term legal, economic, and social pathways continues to shape the everyday reality of refugees in the country.

This brief explores what protracted displacement — defined as a phenomenon where at least 25,000 refugees from the same nationality experience a period of exile longer than five consecutive years without any substantial solutions for repatriation, resettlement, or full integration — looks like in everyday life, drawing both from secondary sources as well as original fieldwork.¹

Between 2024 and 2025, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Syrian and Palestinian refugees residing in Irbid, Jordan's third largest city. Interviews explored refugee experiences with obtaining documentation, work permits, access to services, and their perceptions of return.

Three additional testimonies were collected from refugee students at Yarmouk University who volunteer with the Refugee, Displacement, and Forced Migration Studies Center. Their testimonies illustrate how global policies intersect with local realities and how displacement is lived, negotiated, and imagined on the ground.

Protracted Displacement Across Refugee Communities

Palestinian Refugees Living in Jordan

According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), Jordan currently hosts approximately 2.3 million registered Palestinian refugees, many of whom arrived after the creation of the state of Israel and the mass displacement of Palestinians in

1948.² Many initially settled in temporary encampments that later became the 10 formal refugee camps in Jordan under UNRWA's administration. Others settled in major cities such as the capital, Amman, as well as Irbid and Zarqa. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war brought an estimated 300,000 more Palestinians to Jordan, including many displaced for a second time from Gaza and the West Bank.³

Some Palestinians were naturalized and integrated into Jordanian political and economic life, particularly those who arrived from the West Bank before 1967 and were granted full citizenship following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Many became active participants in public service, education, and commerce, contributing significantly to Jordan's long-term development.⁴ While many Palestinians were successfully incorporated into Jordanian society, two large groups remain excluded from full citizenship rights.

1. The first group includes Palestinians from Gaza who fled to Jordan after Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip in 1967. Unlike West Bank Palestinians, they were not granted Jordanian citizenship upon arriving in Jordan and continue to hold temporary passports that only serve as travel documents without receiving a raqam watani, or national number, which serves as proof of citizenship. This status limits their access to formal employment, property ownership, and higher education, and they frequently are required to pay high "foreigner" tuition fees.⁵ Barriers to education perpetuate a cycle of economic hardship. One interviewee explained:

*"My children go to school, when they finish high school, they can join public universities like Jordanians, but studying fees are much higher, if we could afford it we would send them to Egypt to study because studying fees cost less."*⁶

2. The second group includes Palestinians affected by Jordan's 1988 administrative and legal disengagement from the West Bank. Many lost their citizenship in an effort to affirm a separate Palestinian political identity under the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), internationally recognized as the representative of the Palestinian people. Thousands became stateless and dependent on temporary documents for residence and mobility.⁷

Despite having resided in Jordan for decades, some Palestinians remain socially connected but legally excluded. The experience of Palestinians from Gaza and those affected by the 1988 disengagement thus illustrates how displacement in Jordan has evolved into a long-term protracted condition, rather than temporary exile.

Iraqis Refugees Living in Jordan

Jordan has been a major destination for Iraqi refugees since the early 1990s, with large numbers arriving following the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.⁸ Official data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provides the most accurate count of registered refugees and asylum-seekers, excluding unregistered individuals, long-term residents on visas, or economic migrants.

As of October 2025, UNHCR reported approximately 24,529 Iraqi refugees registered in Jordan.⁹ Broader estimates of the size of the Iraqi-origin population, which includes non-registered Iraqis, vary due to Jordan's lack of comprehensive census data and fluid migration patterns. Historical peaks exceeded 700,000 around 2007, but numbers have declined through resettlement — including to the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Australia — voluntary returns, and tightened entry rules.

Iraqis often settle in urban neighborhoods, send their children to local schools, participate in religious and cultural networks, and build livelihoods through informal work or small businesses, making their presence less visible but more embedded in Jordanian society.¹⁰ The protracted nature of Iraqi displacement in Jordan reflects how multiple generations of Iraqis arriving under different legal, political, and economic circumstances have created overlapping generations of refugees, each facing its own set of challenges and opportunities.

Iraqi refugees in Jordan are often perceived as more socioeconomically integrated than more recent refugee populations such as Syrians; however, this integration remains uneven and incomplete. Several factors contribute to this perception. First, many Iraqis who fled to Jordan following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and subsequent conflicts were from urban, middle-class backgrounds. Often professionals such as doctors, engineers, and business owners who brought financial resources with them.¹¹ This allowed them to invest in local businesses, rent apartments in relatively wealthy neighborhoods of Amman, and establish economic and social networks more quickly than lower-income groups.

In contrast, a larger proportion of Syrian refugees originate from rural or semi-urban areas and arrived with fewer assets, making adaptation to Jordan's urban economy more challenging.¹² Second, the longer duration of Iraqi displacement in Jordan spanning more than two decades. This enabled deeper social ties, including intermarriages and community formation, fostering a stronger sense of belonging to the host community.¹³ Despite relative integration, Iraqi refugees encounter hurdles that perpetuate protracted displacement. These hurdles appear clearly in accessing formal employment, health, and education.

Under the Same Sky of Syrian Displacement

As of December 2025, UNHCR recorded 420,835 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan.¹⁴ The Jordanian government, however, continues to estimate the total number of Syrians — including unregistered individuals and pre-2011 residents — at approximately 1.3 million.¹⁵ Approximately 81% of Syrian refugees in Jordan live in urban and host communities outside camps, with the remaining estimated 19% living in formal camps such as Zaatari and Azraq.¹⁶

Many Syrians living outside camps must regularly renew their UNHCR identification documents and work permits, creating a never-ending cycle of paperwork that reinforces uncertainty and vulnerability for families. One Syrian refugee lamented:

*“Every year my papers expire, and I start over. How am I supposed to think about the future when I’m stuck living one year at a time?”*¹⁷

Sociologist Cecilia Menjivar describes such situations as liminal legality, a condition in which individuals possess a partial or temporary legal status that allows them to reside in a country but which does not grant them full rights, security, or long-term stability. People living in liminal legality are neither fully documented nor fully undocumented; instead, they occupy an in-between legal space where their rights can be uncertain, conditional, or easily revoked. This ambiguity shapes nearly every aspect of daily life, from employment and mobility to access to services and long-term planning, because legal status must be constantly renewed and can be lost through administrative changes or policy shifts.¹⁸

Donor-Driven Aid Structures

Humanitarian assistance in Jordan operates within a donor-driven landscape that shapes what kinds of programs are funded, how they are implemented, and their long-term durability. Because most international programs are short-term and closely tied to donor visibility requirements, agencies are pushed to deliver rapid, quantifiable outputs rather than addressing the deeper structural barriers that would support long-term refugee inclusion.¹⁹ This often creates a disconnect between donor expectations and the everyday realities of refugees and host communities, who require sustained support instead of temporary interventions.

Over time, the predominant reliance on short-term humanitarian financing, while essential for meeting immediate protection and survival needs, has unintentionally contributed to turning acute refugee crises into situations of protracted displacement that stretch across decades. Years of underfunding have led resettlement organizations to prioritize donor preferences over national priorities. As a result, agencies tend to implement short-lived projects that look successful on paper but do little to remedy the deeper conditions that sustain protracted displacement. As one Syrian woman explained:

*“The donors come, train us to make soap or something else for a few months, then they leave. That’s it. We still can’t. ... We can’t sell anything. The project finishes and our life stays the same, looks good for them, but nothing helps us.”*²⁰

Her experience highlights the limits of many livelihood projects, which provide useful training but do not address the legal and economic barriers that prevent full access to employment. Roger Zetter describes this broader pattern as institutionalized temporariness, in which emergency humanitarian

arrangements quietly evolve into long-term governance systems without ever delivering durable solutions such as voluntary repatriation, meaningful resettlement, or genuine local integration.²¹

Restricted Economic Inclusion

Jordan has played a crucial role in offering safety and stability to millions of refugees over several decades. The government's decision to keep its borders open during regional unrest, to allow humanitarian agencies to operate on its land, and to provide access to education and health services has saved many lives and supported regional stability.

Simultaneously, the country faces significant economic pressures, a high unemployment rate, and limited resources, factors that shape to what extent refugees can be included in the formal labor market. Understanding the balance between hospitality and the capacity constraints of providing job opportunities for both Jordanians and refugees is essential to understand where these restrictions come from.

Restrictions on employment affect Palestinians, Syrians, and Iraqis in different ways, but the cumulative result is similar: limited economic opportunities and long-term reliance on humanitarian assistance. For example, Palestinians from Gaza, who lack a national number, are legally not allowed to work in many professions and must rely on informal jobs. One young man in Irbid explained:

*"Every employer would ask about the national Identity number if they want to hire you. So I do small jobs; whatever comes."*²²

Many Syrians have gained greater access to formal employment since the launch of the Jordan Compact in 2016. The Compact, introduced at the London Supporting Syria and the Region Conference, aimed to strengthen the livelihoods of Syrian refugees while stimulating Jordan's economy. In return for

financial assistance, loans, and expanded access to European markets, Jordan committed to issuing work permits for Syrians, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and construction.²³

Despite this shift, work opportunities remained limited because permits were still tied to a narrow set of sectors, and the administrative and financial burdens of obtaining and renewing them posed significant challenges. As a result, many Syrians relied on informal work, where wages were lower and protections were marginal. A Syrian man explained:

“I prefer to work informally rather than applying for a work permit because the process is so complicated and there are hidden costs such as transportation, photocopies and absence from work.”²⁴

For Syrian women, the barriers were even higher. Transportation costs, childcare responsibilities, and the need to travel long distances to apply for permits mean that many women could not maintain a work permit even when they wanted to. As one Syrian mother in Irbid put it:

“I need three buses to go for the permit. Who stays with my kids? Who pays for the day? So I stay home.”²⁵

These gendered costs limited women’s participation in the labor market despite high interest in economic independence. Iraqis face similar barriers because they are not formally recognized as refugees under Jordanian law. They must secure employer sponsorship to work legally, which leaves many excluded from formal employment and vulnerable to unstable job arrangements.

Voluntary Return and Its Emerging Challenges

Voluntary return has become the most politically charged dimension of refugee policy in Jordan and the wider region. Lebanon and Turkey have both announced plans for large-scale returns. Jordan faces growing international and domestic calls to ease the voluntary return of Syrian refugees. However, post-Assad Syria is both plagued with safety concerns, despite contrary narratives, and is at risk of suffering an economic collapse. Destroyed infrastructure has rendered 90% of Syrians impoverished, significantly weakening reintegration prospects.²⁶

A Syrian woman shared her concerns about returning to Syria:

*“My home in Dera’a is partially destroyed. How can I go back to Syria? I have a roof on top of my head here in Jordan, even if it's rented, but I don’t have a home in Syria, even if it's owned.”*²⁷

Cuts to aid, residency restrictions, and rising hostility create conditions where voluntary return effectively becomes forced. Even if a political transition in Syria reduces conflict, the sheer scale of destruction makes rapid return unlikely. Scholars argue this may mark the beginning of a new era of protracted return — where return becomes as prolonged and uncertain as displacement itself.²⁸

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this brief illustrate that Jordan’s refugee response, despite its long history of hospitality and strong commitment to protection, still relies on systems built for short-term emergencies rather than the long-term reality many refugees now face. Temporary documents, limited job opportunities,

and unstable funding make it difficult for refugees to plan their futures. These challenges are not only humanitarian; they affect Jordan's development goals, labor market dynamics, and social cohesion. Building on these findings, several practical steps can help improve outcomes for both refugees and host communities:

- Involve refugees from all backgrounds in decision-making around aid distribution and return.
- Expand access to higher education, vocational training, and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Strengthen collaboration between host communities and refugees through investment in shared infrastructure, municipal services, and social cohesion programs.
- Shift humanitarian financing toward multiyear funding aligned with Jordan's development plans.
- Expand economic inclusion by removing sectoral restrictions on work permits, facilitating entry into information and communications technology, education, and health care, and prioritizing targeted programs for women and youth.
- Safeguard voluntary return to ensure it is safe, dignified, and truly voluntary, with independent monitoring of conditions in Syria.

Together, these measures offer pathways toward a more sustainable, strategic and future-oriented refugee system that recognizes the long-term nature of displacement in Jordan. They aim to create conditions where both refugees and host communities can move toward greater stability and dignity.

Authors

Ruba Al Akash, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of anthropology in the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology at Yarmouk University. She earned her Ph.D. in social anthropology from the University of Kent, Canterbury, and was a visiting research fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. A social anthropologist focused on the Middle East, gender, women's studies, displacement, and forced migration, her research is highly interdisciplinary, operating at the intersection of social, political, and urban anthropology. Her recent work examines the impact of forced migration on Syrian refugees in Jordan, both inside and outside camps, with a particular focus on the experiences of Syrian refugee women.

Ibrahim Darwish, Ph.D., is an associate professor of linguistics and translation at Yarmouk University, Jordan, and director of the Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Centre. His research focuses on refugee education, language and power, and translation studies. He has contributed to numerous projects addressing the educational needs of refugees and the challenges of academic integration. Darwish advocates for refugees' right to access higher education in host communities, promoting inclusion, equity, and opportunity for all.

Notes

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Protracted Refugee Situations Explained,” USA for UNHCR, January 28, 2020, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/protracted-refugee-situations-explained/>.
2. Established in 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the main provider of education, health care, and social services for registered Palestinian refugees across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza (*UNRWA in Figures 2023* [2023], 4, <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/about-unrwa/unrwa-figures-2023>).
3. Åge A. Tiltnes and Huafeng Zhang, *Progress, Challenges, Diversity: Insights into the Socio-Economic Conditions of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan* (Fafo, 2013), <https://www.fafo.no/images/pub/2013/20332.pdf>.
4. Tiltnes and Zhang, *Progress, Challenges, Diversity*.
5. UNRWA, *UNRWA in Figures 2023*.
6. Interview with Palestinian refugee woman, aged 42, Irbid, Jordan, 2024.
7. UNRWA, *UNRWA in Figures 2023*.
8. Human Rights Watch, *The Silent Treatment: Fleeing Iraq, Surviving in Jordan* (2006), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2006/11/27/silent-treatment/fleeing-iraq-surviving-jordan>.
9. UNHCR, “Jordan: Operational Data Portal,” UNHCR Operational Data Portal, October 31, 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/jor>.
10. Géraldine Chatelard, “Iraqi Refugees and Temporary Protection Regimes in Jordan and Syria,” in *Iraqi Refugees: The Invisible Crisis*, ed. J. Sassoon (Georgetown University Press, 2009).
11. Omar Dewachi, “When Wounds Travel,” *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 2, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.17157/mat.2.3.182>.
12. Katharina Lenner and Lewis Turner, “Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labor Market in Jordan,” *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 1 (2019): 65–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1462601>.
13. Chatelard, “Jordan: A Refugee Haven,” *Migration Information Source*, Migration Policy Institute, August 31, 2010, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/jordan-refugee-haven/>.
14. UNHCR, “Jordan: Operational Data Portal.”
15. “UNHCR Says ‘Significant’ Number of Syrian Refugees Return Home From Jordan,” *Jordan Times*, January 15, 2025, <https://jordantimes.com/news/local/unhcr-says-significant-number-syrian-refugees-return-home-jordan>.
16. UNHCR, “Jordan,” UNHCR Global Focus: Operational Portal, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/jordan>.

Notes (cont'd)

17. Interview with Syrian refugee man, aged 32, Irbid, Jordan, 2024.
18. Cecilia Menjivar, "Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 4 (2006): 999–1037, <https://doi.org/10.1086/499509>.
19. Alexander Betts et al., *Local Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Exploring Responses in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan* (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2017), https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/files-1/local-politics-and-syrian-refugee-crisis_report-web.pdf.
20. Interview with Syrian refugee woman, aged 35, Irbid, Jordan, 2025.
21. Roger Zetter, *Reframing Displacement Crises as Development Opportunities*, Policy Briefing (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2014), <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/files-1/pn-reframing-displacement-crisis-2014.pdf>.
22. Interview with Palestinian man, aged 29, Irbid, Jordan, 2025.
23. Government of Jordan, *The Jordan Compact: A New Holistic Approach Between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the International Community to Deal with the Syrian Refugee Crisis* (Supporting Syria and the Region Conference, 2016), <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/jordan-compact-new-holistic-approach-between-hashemite-kingdom-jordan-and>.
24. Interview with Syrian refugee man, aged 27, Irbid, Jordan, 2024.
25. Interview with Syrian refugee woman, aged 35, Irbid, Jordan, 2025.
26. World Bank, *The Fallout of War: The Regional Consequences of the Conflict in Syria* (2022), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/363101592427572069/pdf/The-Fallout-of-War-The-Regional-Consequences-of-the-Conflict-in-Syria.pdf>.
27. Interview with Syrian refugee women, aged 43, Irbid, Jordan, 2025.
28. Dawn Chatty, "The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster: Understanding Perceptions and Aspirations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey," *Global Policy* 8 (2017): 25–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12390>.



PRAGMATIC INTEGRATION OF SYRIANS IN LEBANON

Josiane Matar

Following the Syrian civil war, Lebanon became host to one of the highest numbers of refugees per capita, with an estimated 1.5 million Syrians residing in the country.¹ As Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and lacks a national asylum system, the government avoided formally recognizing Syrians as refugees. Instead, it designated them as *nazihin*, or displaced, to sidestep international obligations and preserve the demographic balance underpinning its sectarian consociational order.²

This stance became known as a “policy of no policy,” through which the state declined to establish a coherent response and delegated most responsibilities

to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and local actors.³ This reflects Lebanon's broader pattern of political paralysis, marked by institutional fragmentation, a lack of reform, and an unwillingness to address deepening structural problems.

Since 2019, Lebanon's crises have deepened. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic collapse, and the Beirut port explosion have further destabilized an already fragile socioeconomic landscape. Public frustration with state institutions has intensified, reflecting a widespread loss of faith in the state's ability to implement policies or meet basic needs.

Syrian refugees, like their Lebanese hosts, have faced an exclusionary and corrupt environment that leaves them invisible and frames them as a burden, trapping them in legal limbo with no prospects for formal integration or regularization. In this vacuum, both communities have developed informal survival strategies to navigate uncertainty, secure basic needs, and sustain livelihoods.

Lebanon's Refugee Landscape

This policy brief introduces the concept of pragmatic integration: an adaptation that emerges over time in protracted crises, when repeated resilience strategies evolve into more permanent forms of social and economic embeddedness. In this context, survival depends on mutual dependence and localized resource-sharing between refugees and host communities, developing in the absence of formal aid or state-led integration policies. It encompasses diverse forms of adaptation born of shared vulnerability, ranging from infrastructures of care within refugee networks to conditioned solidarity between refugees and hosts, where cooperation is driven by necessity rather than choice.

According to the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) "Glossary on Migration," integration is a "two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the receiving community."⁴ In academic debates, this phenomenon is typically understood as a policy-led process directed by the state through asylum regulations, labor market measures, and service provision.⁵ Yet, in Lebanon, integration unfolds differently. With no formal pathways and limited institutional support, the work of integration often falls to migrants and host communities themselves. It is negotiated through daily interactions, informal economies, and shared spaces of encounter.

Policy Vacuum and Non-Regulation

Lebanon's approach reflects strategic non-regulation, whereby the state distances itself from direct responsibility for refugee management while relying on ambiguity and delegated authority to maintain control.⁶ The everyday practices of state and non-state actors over time have made this reliance a routine, producing institutionalized patterns that sustain a sense of order without addressing underlying structural problems.

Pragmatic integration captures this reality but places greater emphasis on the agency by which refugees transform coping strategies into more durable, though still informal, forms of embeddedness, where the boundary between survival and integration becomes fluid.

The aim here is not to normalize non-regulation, but to recognize that its effects are not uniformly negative for refugees. In practice, the looseness and ambiguity that characterize Lebanon's governance can create small but meaningful spaces in which refugees organize their lives. These openings allow for forms of de facto integration, where people participate in everyday economic and social life despite lacking legal status or formal rights.⁷

Pragmatic integration builds on this foundation and tends to emerge in protracted crises. While de facto integration is largely reactive and centered on short-term endurance, pragmatic integration reflects a shift toward embeddedness, where coping practices become routine and enable sustained participation in the host society's economic and social life. This trajectory echoes broader discussions of a fourth durable solution, in which people survive and participate in daily life without any resolution of their legal status or protection needs.⁸

Methodology

Drawing on six months of fieldwork from February to September 2024 in Nahr Ibrahim and Bourj Hammoud, Lebanon, this policy brief examines how pragmatic integration emerges in contexts of protracted refugee presence and overlapping crises, particularly where state structures are absent.

The locations were selected for their large refugee populations and the presence of UNHCR-affiliated community centers, which facilitated access to interlocutors during a period of political volatility.⁹ The findings draw on 60 semi-structured interviews, conducted mainly in Arabic, with Syrian refugees, Lebanese hosts, and social workers. Fieldwork also included participant observation in community centers run by UNHCR implementing partners, during outreach activities, and in refugee homes and informal tented settlements.

These settings provided valuable access to everyday interactions from negotiations between refugees and landlords to informal economic exchanges and revealed stories that would not have surfaced in more formal spaces. Immersion in these contexts allowed for close observation of how refugees navigate legal ambiguity, sustain livelihoods in the informal economy, and engage with both humanitarian and municipal actors. These insights underpin the ethnographic vignettes presented throughout the brief.

Pragmatic Integration Explained

With no legal recognition of refugees in Lebanon and no access to formal asylum pathways, Syrians live entirely outside a protection framework. In principle, such a legal vacuum fosters prolonged precarity, social exclusion, and dependence on humanitarian aid. Refugees subsequently experience limited agency and are prevented from meaningfully integrating into Lebanese society.

Field research, however, reveals a more nuanced reality. Beyond political rhetoric and popular narratives of tension, daily life in markets, neighborhoods, and workplaces shows patterns of informal cooperation and solidarity between refugees and hosts. These practices, largely invisible in policy debates, challenge assumptions of refugee passivity and highlight locally driven strategies of survival and coexistence. Thus, recognizing and engaging with these dynamics is essential to designing policies that reflect realities on the ground rather than idealized models of integration.

Refugee-Led Adaptation and Networks

As Lebanon's economic crisis worsened and international funding declined, the already precarious financial conditions of refugees only worsened. In response, many refugees resorted to self-organized pathways for survival that allowed them to meet their basic needs, enabling them to use their own agency to respond to hardship.

Community Support and Informal Lending

In many neighborhoods, families and friendship circles have developed informal lending arrangements within their communities, allowing people to borrow money to pay rent, purchase groceries, or cover medical expenses.

Building on these close networks, youth refugees created broader initiatives using technology and skills from community center trainings to connect refugees across regions, exchange resources, and coordinate mutual support.

Technology and Coordination Across Regions

During fieldwork, I met Batoul, a 21-year-old Syrian refugee who had created a WhatsApp group called “The Magic Lantern.” By the time of the interview, the group had grown to over 700 members across the Byblos region. Open exclusively to Syrians, it served as a space to share job opportunities, request assistance, exchange household goods, and circulate information about funding or health care services. Batoul spoke with pride about what she and others had built:

“We managed to create our own world here. ... We are supporting many people in need, and many refugees are coming together to offer support through this platform that would not be available otherwise. We have proved that we can rely on ourselves and make ends meet, even with the little humanitarian assistance we receive.”¹⁰

Some of these assistance networks have also extended to the host community. Social workers have used them to recruit participants for surveys and activities, while Lebanese landlords have posted housing and job opportunities through the same WhatsApp group. In this way, Batoul became a social bridge between refugees and hosts.

This was one of many examples where collaboration and grassroots, refugee-led initiatives stepped in to fill gaps left by absent state policies. Their advocacy created locally-driven systems of support that foster social ties between refugees and host communities. These community-led mechanisms illustrate one dimension of pragmatic integration.

Navigating Informal Systems

A second dimension of pragmatic integration emerges in the ways refugees adapt to Lebanon's broader governance and economic systems. Beyond community networks, many refugees have learned to operate within the country's entrenched patterns of nepotism and clientelism, which have long shaped relationships between Lebanese citizens and their political representatives. While formal integration remains impossible in Lebanon, refugees have adapted by embedding themselves in the country's informal systems economically, socially, and politically.

Adapting to Clientelism and Governance

In a political environment marked by chaos, refugees have developed an understanding of clientelist governance and the patterns embedded in Lebanon's political system. This reflects a form of pragmatic integration in which survival and social embeddedness depend not on legal rights, but on the ability to operate within — and at times benefit from — the same informal systems that shape life for Lebanese citizens.

Security, Tenure, and Political Networks

Following the murder of a Lebanese political party representative, a Syrian national was convicted for the crime. His conviction prompted multiple local municipalities to issue ultimatums and directives for Syrian refugees to evacuate their homes and leave their jobs.¹¹ I met with several refugees in Nahr Ibrahim to discuss the situation. Many voiced fears of deportation, describing heightened tensions and uncertainty. Yet, personal connections sometimes offered protection. As one interlocutor explained:

“My landlord knows the mayor. ... He spoke to him, and I was allowed to stay in the house. I haven't been threatened since.”¹²

This example illustrates how informal networks can play a decisive role in shaping refugees' security and continuity of residence. In Lebanon, personal connections and political allegiance have long been central to how citizens access their rights and navigate bureaucratic hurdles, a pattern that has also become embedded in the strategies adopted by many Syrians. While these arrangements are inherently precarious and short-lived, they form some of the adaptive strategies through which refugees navigate protracted displacement in Lebanon.

Together with community-led solidarity, this form of adaptive embeddedness constitutes pragmatic integration not through formal policy or legal rights, but through active participation in the informal structures that govern daily life for both refugees and hosts.

Mutual Dependence and Conditioned Solidarity

Policy-driven integration relies on formal frameworks that enable labor market access, community participation, and involvement in civic life. In Lebanon, however, government restrictions on work permits and limits on the sectors open to refugees mean that formal integration is effectively absent.¹³

Nevertheless, many refugees have entered the informal economy, working with Lebanese employers in sectors such as services and construction. By accepting lower wages, working longer hours, and providing technical skills in sectors facing labor shortages, refugees have become indispensable to these industries. This creates a form of functioning interdependence between refugees and Lebanese landlords and business owners but also exposes refugees to the risk of exploitation, including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, and limited labor protections.

Economic Interdependence

Refugees often live in informal tented settlements, neglected properties, or farms rented by landlords without improvements. Whether by cultivating abandoned farmland and sharing profits with land owners, or by renting substandard housing that would otherwise remain unused, refugees have transformed underutilized resources into economic value, benefiting hosts while securing their own survival. Following the eviction directive mentioned earlier, one landlady explained:

*“I have a few families living here who are not registered, but I accept them because the government isn’t making the process easier for them. What can I do about it? They are my source of income. When the authorities carry out evacuation raids, it’s not only the Syrians who suffer — my income stops as well.”*¹⁴

These accounts illustrate how functioning interdependence operates as a core dimension of pragmatic integration, where refugees and hosts develop reciprocal arrangements that meet mutual needs. Yet, such integration is rarely grounded in acceptance; rather, it is sustained by mutual necessity. Public narratives in Lebanon, and the views of many citizens, frequently express frustration and resentment toward refugees, even as landlords and business owners openly acknowledge the economic benefits of their presence.

Social Distance and Selective Cooperation

The interviewed landlady had rented her abandoned building to more than 50 Syrian families. She later told me:

*“Lebanon needs the Syrians. They’re filling gaps and providing essential services that we, as Lebanese, have failed to deliver. It’s not simply that I’m benefiting from them — they’re helping the country as a whole.”*¹⁵

Moments later, however, she voiced sentiments that reflect prevailing discriminatory attitudes:

*“They are dirty, they haven’t learned how to be neat — that’s their problem. You have to use force from time to time to make them behave.”*¹⁶

These contrasting statements depict a form of conditioned solidarity, where Lebanese hosts hire and rent Syrian refugees for personal interests while maintaining social distance. In this context, pragmatic integration in Lebanon emerges from conditional, interest-driven reciprocity rather than a willingness to incorporate refugees into the national social fabric.

Policy Recommendations

Pragmatic integration raises important normative and political questions. It exists largely outside state policy, driven by necessity and sustained through refugee-to-refugee networks with selective links to host communities. This reality creates a tension for policymakers: Should these informal forms of integration be acknowledged and supported, or should the focus remain on securing formal rights and state-led pathways?

This brief argues that the two are not mutually exclusive. Pragmatic integration should be recognized as a bottom-up coping system that stabilizes daily life but not as a substitute for formal protections.

1. Recognize and strengthen existing forms of pragmatic integration.

In Lebanon's protracted crisis, refugees and host communities rely heavily on informal systems to meet daily needs. Rather than replacing these practices, the government should build on them by introducing limited legal pathways for residency, work, and economic participation, enabling refugees to operate within regulated frameworks. Civil society and religious institutions — already key providers of support and local reconciliation — should be resourced to continue facilitating community-level inclusion.

- 2. Align national policy with local realities.** Syria's political transition is prompting refugees to reassess the possibility of return, creating increased mobility and uncertainty. Lebanon urgently needs predictable procedures to manage this period. Limited measures such as temporary permits, regulated access to work, and clear renewal rules would reduce informality, ease pressure on municipalities, and support refugees who remain. Furthermore, documented exit and reentry arrangements would make return safer and reversible, giving the Lebanese state greater oversight and reducing unregulated movement.

- 3. Support participatory, bottom-up models of inclusion.** Top-down humanitarian approaches often overlook the agency of refugees and the capacities of local actors. International organizations and donors should adopt participatory planning methods by recognizing refugee-led initiatives, establishing inclusive consultation platforms, and codesigning programs on livelihoods, housing, and service access. As Syria undergoes a period of fragile transition, sustained donor engagement is essential to help Lebanon manage regional uncertainty, safeguard voluntary return processes, and maintain stability while respecting Lebanese sovereignty.

Author

Josiane Matar is a Rhodes Scholar for the Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine region (SJLP) and a Ph.D. candidate in Migration Studies at the University of Oxford.

Notes

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “UNHCR Lebanon at a Glance,” <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/about-unhcr/unhcr-lebanon-glance>.
2. Consociationalism denotes Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system based on communal representation and elite bargaining. For further explanation, see Imad Salamey, *The Government and Politics of Lebanon* (Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.3726/b16176>.
3. Karim El Mufti, “Official Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Disastrous Policy of No-Policy,” Civil Society Knowledge Centre (2014), <https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/official-response-syrian-refugee-crisis-lebanon-disastrous-policy-no-policy>.
4. International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Glossary on Migration* (2019), https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf.
5. For further discussion of integration discourses, see Jan-Paul Brekke and Tone Borchgrevink, *Talking about Integration: Discourses, Alliances and Theories on Labour Market Integration in Sweden* (Institute for Social Research, 2007), <https://www.temaasyl.se/Documents/Brekke2.pdf>.
6. Katharina Natter et al., “Strategic Non-Regulation as Migration Governance,” *Migration Politics* 2, no. 004 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.21468/MigPol.2.1.004>.
7. For further discussion on de facto integration, see Kelsey P. Norman, “Migration Diplomacy and Policy Liberalization in Morocco and Turkey,” *International Migration Review* 54, no. 4 (2020): 1154–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319895271>; Josiane Matar, “De Facto Resilience as the New Normal,” Lebanese American University School of Arts and Sciences, April 24, 2025, <https://soas.lau.edu.lb/news/2025/04/de-facto-resilience-as-the-new-normal.php>.
8. Cathrine Brun and Anita H. Fábos, “Mobilizing Home for Long-Term Displacement: A Critical Reflection on the Durable Solutions,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9, no. 2 (2017): 177–83, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/hux021>.
9. Fieldwork coincided with a period of heightened insecurity. Cross-border clashes between Hezbollah and Israel escalated throughout 2024, culminating in a broader conflict in September, which restricted mobility in several areas and required the researcher to evacuate temporarily.

Notes (cont'd)

10. Interview with Syrian refugee Nahr Ibrahim, Lebanon, 2024.
11. Salah Hijazi, "What We Do and Don't Know about the Murder of Pascal Sleiman," L'Orient Today, April 9, 2024, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1409814/what-we-do-and-dont-know-about-the-murder-of-pascal-sleiman.html>; MENA Rights Group, "Joint Statement: Lebanon Must End Practices of Refoulement and Torture," June 25, 2024, <https://menarights.org/en/articles/joint-statement-lebanon-must-end-practices-refoulement-and-torture>.
12. Interview with Syrian refugee, Nahr Ibrahim, Lebanon, 2024.
13. Ibrahim Yasin, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: Between Political Incitement and International Law," Arab Center Washington DC, October 3, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-syrian-refugee-crisis-in-lebanon-between-political-incitement-and-international-law/>.
14. Interview with Lebanese landlady, Nahr Ibrahim, Lebanon, 2024.
15. Interview with Lebanese landlady, Nahr Ibrahim, Lebanon, 2024.
16. Interview with Lebanese landlady, Nahr Ibrahim, Lebanon, 2024.



REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS AND LOCALIZATION IN LEBANON

Watfa Najdi

In recent years, international donors, along with humanitarian actors, have increasingly recognized refugee-led organizations (RLOs) as important partners in delivering aid to communities living in protracted displacement.¹ During the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the first global conference on humanitarian action convened by the U.N., several actors called for aid to be localized to initiatives operated by individuals affected by humanitarian crises.² The aim was to move away from top-down, often short-term humanitarian interventions and instead empower and fund locally embedded organizations, including those led by refugees. This marked a major turning point in formalizing localization. The concept was later incorporated into several

agendas and commitments. Most relevant among these was the Grand Bargain, which committed to strengthening the capacities of local humanitarian actors and increasing the share of funding directed to them to 25% by 2020.³

In the following years, several new funding initiatives targeting RLOs emerged. These included the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Refugee-led Innovation Fund; the Refugee Leadership Alliance Empowerment Fund (RLA); the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative's Fund (RRLI); the Network for Empowered Aid (NEAR) Change Fund; and the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF), as well as grants by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Choose Love and Cohere. The localization promise appeared transformative: By empowering refugees to lead their own humanitarian responses, the international community could address long-standing power imbalances and create more effective, culturally appropriate, and durable solutions. However, this policy brief highlights a significant gap between the rhetoric of localization and its implementation reality.

Results from 11 interviews conducted throughout 2022 with different Syrian RLOs based in Lebanon indicate that current localization efforts by international donors and humanitarian organizations continue to favor and empower particular types of RLOs — specifically those that are legally registered and can meet Western humanitarian standards. This selective recognition raises critical questions around who is included in, or excluded from, localization efforts, and why.⁴ More fundamentally, it prompts reflection on how the international community can localize humanitarian action while empowering refugee communities to lead their own responses.

Lebanon as a Testing Ground for Localization

Lebanon presents an important case for understanding localization in practice. Since 2011, the country has hosted over a million Syrian refugees in what became a protracted refugee crisis.⁵ Unlike traditional refugee reception contexts with formal camps, Lebanon's "no-camp policy," resulted in dispersed settlement patterns where refugees live alongside Lebanese communities in urban and rural areas.⁶

This created both opportunities and challenges for RLOs. On the one hand, RLOs emerged organically and were well-positioned to fill critical gaps left by the formal humanitarian system as it struggled to reach refugees across diverse locations.⁷ On the other hand, the Lebanese legal framework prevented refugees from legally registering these initiatives and organizations, leaving RLO members vulnerable to arrest.⁸ These constraints were further intensified by government calls for the forced return of Syrian refugees, which escalated as the crisis became increasingly protracted.

The 11 RLOs encountered in this study operated across multiple regions in Lebanon, including the Bekaa Valley, northern Lebanon, and Beirut. They provided a range of services, including education, legal protection, livelihood support, recreational activities, and health support. Their sizes ranged from small, informal initiatives to larger, registered organizations. Out of 11 organizations, six lacked formal registration, substantial funding, paid staff, or a wide geographical reach. In contrast, five were formally registered, had paid staff, received international funding, and had cofounders or leadership with foreign education credentials or, in some cases, dual citizenship. These structural differences translated into markedly unequal experiences in accessing, or not accessing, funding.

Barriers to Localization

Numerous barriers limit small-scale RLOs' access to funding opportunities.⁹ These barriers are not merely technical; they reflect deeper structural constraints that localization efforts have failed to address.

Legal and Financial Barriers

In Lebanon, Syrian refugees are denied access to a wide range of rights, including the ability to legally register an organization.¹⁰ As a result, non-registered RLOs operate under constant risk of raids, arrests, and fines. Despite these constraints, many funding opportunities continue to require RLOs to be formally registered. One small-scale RLO leader described a 2021 call for proposals explicitly targeting RLOs, which nonetheless required applicants to be registered nonprofit organizations with sufficient administrative capacity to meet donor reporting and monitoring requirements.¹¹ The call further required that the selected RLO submit copies of their financial and bank statements. Such requirements overlook the fact that most Syrian refugees in Lebanon face severe barriers to accessing financial services, as banks follow "Know Your Customer (KYC) and Customer Due Diligence requirements, which require proof of IDs and often additional documentation such as proof of address and residency permits, for individuals to conduct financial transactions and open a bank account."¹²

This effectively excludes many small-scale or community-based RLOs from the financial space and restricts their ability to meet donor-defined criteria. Many RLO leaders, despite these limitations, have tried to register their initiatives. However, as one RLO founder explained:

*"It is very expensive. If I had enough money for registration costs, I would prefer to buy resources for our initiative instead of paying for registration. Also, it takes seven to eight months to finalize registration, and we need a Lebanese partner."*¹³

Language and Communication Gaps

None of the small-scale RLOs had staff specialized in writing grants. In many cases, they struggled to translate their activities and community experiences into the format and technical language expected by donors. Although some funding opportunities permitted applications to be submitted in Arabic, most RLO leaders preferred to apply in English, even if it required using translation tools. Many did so to present their proposals in a manner perceived as “more professional” and to signal “international experience” to donors.¹⁴

This dynamic reflects deeper issues that extend beyond language barriers. In a conversation with a RLO founder, he made a powerful statement:

“We don't speak the language of the donors.”¹⁵

This statement captures a fundamental disconnect between how refugees understand and express their work and the specialized terminology and frameworks that formal humanitarian systems often prioritize.

Selective Empowerment in Funding

RLOs that are successful in acquiring international funding are typically led by founders with foreign education credentials, international networks, and formal registration in Lebanon or in European countries.¹⁶ Their organizational structures, reporting systems, and communication styles closely align with Western expectations about professionalism and transparency. One successful RLO founder explained:

“Being registered in Belgium offers our organization EU standards. Having European standards gives credibility to our work and increases our chances with donors who are usually skeptical about working with people from our region.”¹⁷

This organization maintained a multinational staff including British, Canadian, and French nationals, alongside Syrian staff, and had received funding from major donors, including the Ford Foundation, the British Council, and the German Federal Foreign Office.

In contrast, smaller organizations led by refugees from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and lacking international connections consistently failed to access funding despite providing essential community services. These organizations often rely on volunteer networks, provide sustained support to community members, and demonstrate a deep understanding of local needs — precisely the qualities that localization rhetoric emphasizes.

Current funding patterns, however, reveal how localization approaches can reproduce the very power hierarchies they claim to challenge. Rather than recognizing diverse forms of refugee organization and knowledge, funding mechanisms tend to favor organizations best able to conform to externally imposed standards of legitimacy set by international donors.

Alternative Practices of Care

Despite not accessing international funding, smaller-scale RLOs develop alternative practices to support their communities and operate outside traditional humanitarian frameworks. These initiatives and approaches offer insights into how refugees organize when external assistance proves inadequate.

Most small-scale RLOs maintain extensive volunteer networks that provide services over long periods, rather than within fixed project cycles. For example, one founder mobilized 154 volunteers across Lebanon for ongoing aid distribution and referral services without any international funding. Another organization has provided continuous support to sick community members for over a decade because, as the founder explained:

*“Visiting the sick is very important to us. This is how we maintain a strong sense of community.”*¹⁸

One RLO worked with refugee teachers who volunteer to educate children with disabilities in the Bourj el-Barajneh camp, located in the southern suburb of Beirut. Their space doubled as a gathering place for women to socialize, creating educational responses that address not just immediate needs but build long-term community relations across Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese populations.

Some RLO leaders deliberately resisted adapting their approaches to align with donor requirements. As one founder explained:

*“We currently don’t have funding; we rely on member donations. However, this gives us the freedom to make decisions independently. ... We will not accept to be controlled by foreign funding.”*¹⁹

This refusal to conform to donor expectations highlights how some refugee-led organizations prioritize community autonomy over external financial support. These refugee-led initiatives reveal possibilities for responding to protracted displacement in alternative ways. Rather than delivering predetermined services to beneficiaries, they build ongoing and long-term relationships within their communities. Furthermore, they do not operate through project cycles; instead, they strive to maintain a consistent presence across years. For them, success is not measured quantitatively, but through community self-determination, dignity, and cultural preservation.

Conclusion

Localization efforts, as currently practiced, favor particular forms of refugee-led responses that can align with and conform to Western humanitarian standards. These practices often marginalize smaller initiatives and alternative forms of care embedded in refugee communities. This selective empowerment illustrates how humanitarian interventions, despite their stated intentions, can reproduce familiar power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion through ostensibly new approaches.

The experiences of the RLOs interviewed in Lebanon demonstrate that refugees have developed effective systems of community care and mutual support that operate both within and beyond international humanitarian systems. For localization to fulfill its stated promise, humanitarian actors must recognize and center refugee knowledge, priorities, and ways of organizing, rather than requiring them to adapt and translate their approaches to meet donor-defined expectations.

As displacement crises are becoming increasingly protracted around the world, the lessons from Lebanon offer important insights for supporting refugee communities as agents of their own solutions rather than beneficiaries of external interventions. Here, the challenge facing the international humanitarian community would not be how to empower or enhance refugees' capacities in order to meet external standards, but how to transform humanitarian frameworks to recognize the legitimacy and effectiveness of community-led responses.

Policy Recommendations

This brief demonstrates that for localization to be meaningful, it requires a shift in how the international humanitarian community approaches refugee-

led responses, as well as in how RLOs navigate structural constraints and available avenues for funding. This shift would include:

For Donors and International Organizations

- Developing alternative funding opportunities that consider the barriers that RLOs face in protracted displacement settings. This could involve reducing registration and financial documentation requirements and instead offering alternative verification options, such as community verification or simplified financial reporting.
- Developing assessment criteria that value diverse refugee-led networks, collectives, and aid systems. Rather than imposing conformity to external organizational standards as prerequisites for legitimacy, donors should support refugees in strengthening their community-grounded approaches shaped by refugees' own priorities.

For Host Countries

- Addressing structural barriers that RLOs face in host countries, particularly restrictive policies that keep RLOs in legally precarious positions. This requires host countries to adjust their registration laws to support RLOs' legal presence and ease their access to financial services.

For INGOs and Local NGOs

- Creating partnerships between RLOs and INGOs/NGOs so they can legally receive and channel funds on behalf of RLOs. Such mechanisms would widen the pool of eligible organizations and reduce the administrative burden that currently privileges a small subset of professionalized RLOs.

For Refugee Communities and RLOs

- Sharing knowledge and past experiences on navigating humanitarian systems and donor expectations in order to strengthen the collective position of refugee-led responses.
- Establishing shared administrative hubs through which RLOs can utilize pooled accountants, translators, proposal writers, and monitoring officers, enabling them to meet donor requirements without fundamentally transforming their organizational structure.
- Developing partnership models among RLOs in which some organizations manage administrative requirements while others focus on community components. Such models acknowledge that while the system is unequal, peer support mechanisms can redistribute some power and resources, expanding access for less-connected groups.
- Documenting existing practices and maintaining an archive of activities, volunteer contributions, and community narratives, which can serve as informal types of evidence when formal reporting mechanisms are not feasible.

Author

Watfa Najdi is a Ph.D. candidate in development studies at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research draws on decolonial thought to examine humanitarian governance and knowledge production in contexts of forced displacement. Najdi's work centers on alternative epistemologies and forms of care practiced through community-led responses in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Notes

1. Mustafa Alio et al., "By Refugees, for Refugees: Refugee Leadership during COVID-19, and Beyond," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 32, no. 2 (2020): 370–73, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeaa021>.
2. The World Humanitarian Summit was initiated by U.N. Secretary-General. It brought together representatives from governments, humanitarian organizations, the private sector, and other stakeholders affected by humanitarian crises around the world.
3. The Grand Bargain is a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organizations who have committed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action, in order to get more means into the hands of people in need. Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020* (2020), <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/>.
4. Watfa Najdi, "Thinking Localization, Refugee Leadership and Humanitarian Funding from the Eastern Mediterranean: Selective Empowerment or Systemic Colonizing Exclusion?" in *Colonial Legacies and Arab-Majority Regions: From Contemporary Conditions to Alternative Futures*, ed. Ali Kassem (Bristol University Press, 2026).
5. European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), *Lebanon* (European Commission, 2025), https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/lebanon_en.
6. Romola Sanyal, "A No-Camp Policy: Interrogating Informal Settlements in Lebanon," *Geoforum* 84 (2017): 117–25, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.011>; Mona Fawaz, "Exceptions and the Actually Existing Practice of Planning: Beirut (Lebanon) as Case Study," *Urban Studies* 54, no. 8 (2017): 1831–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016640453>.

Notes (cont'd)

7. Kate Pincock et al., "The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation: Refugee-Led Organisations in Humanitarian Governance," *Journal of Development Studies* 57, no. 5 (2021): 719–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1802010>.
8. Najdi et al., "Refugee Mobilisation to Support Refugee Rights in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey," *Forced Migration Review*, special issue "Mobilising for Rights in the MENA Region" (2023), <https://www.fmreview.org/rights-mobilisation/najdi-hoshmand-alhamouri-elabed>.
9. Oroub El-Abed et al., "Patterns of Refugees' Organization amid Protracted Displacement: An Understanding from Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 11, no. 1 (2023): 109–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024231160451>; Charlotte Sturridge et al., *The Failure to Fund Refugee-Led Organisations: Why the Current System Is Not Working, and the Potential for Change* (Humanitarian Policy Group, 2023).
10. Nizar Saghieh, "Manufacturing Vulnerability in Lebanon: Legal Policies as Efficient Tools of Discrimination," *The Legal Agenda*, 2015, <https://english.legal-agenda.com/manufacturing-vulnerability-in-lebanon-legal-policies-as-efficient-tools-of-discrimination/>.
11. "Open Call for Refugee Leadership in Lebanon," Daleel Madani, <https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/choose-love-inc/calls/open-call-refugee-leadership-lebanon/>; Interview with RLO representative, March 2022.
12. Andreas Hackl and Najdi, "Online Work as Humanitarian Relief? The Promise and Limitations of Digital Livelihoods for Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Youth during Times of Crisis," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 56, no. 1 (2023): 100–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X231184470>.
13. Interview with refugee-led organization (RLO) representative, February 2022.
14. Interview with RLO representative, February 2022.
15. Interview with RLO representative, March 2022.
16. Charlotte Sturridge et al., *The Failure to Fund Refugee-Led Organisations: Why the Current System Is Not Working, and the Potential for Change*, Humanitarian Policy Group, November 3, 2023, <https://odi.org/en/publications/the-failure-to-fund-refugee-led-organisations-why-the-current-system-is-not-working-and-the-potential-for-change/>.
17. Interview with RLO representative, June 2022.
18. Interview with RLO representative, February 2022.
19. Interview with RLO representative, March 2022.



COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS FOR REFUGEES IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Najwa Belkiz

The global refugee protection system is under unprecedented strain. More than 123 million people are displaced worldwide, yet traditional resettlement is available to only a small fraction.¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 2.5 million people will need resettlement in 2026, but only 120,000 places are expected.² Funding cuts further constrain the humanitarian response. As a result, momentum is growing around complementary pathways that offer legal alternatives for accessing safety and opportunity.³

The United Arab Emirates as a Secondary Destination

Gulf states, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have quietly become secondary destinations, admitting displaced people under tourist, labor, or humanitarian programs. The UAE lacks formal asylum systems and is a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, yet its stability and economic prospects continue to attract people fleeing conflict.⁴ In this legal vacuum, refugees face visa insecurity, limited services, and fragmented support. Informal initiatives have stepped in to fill these gaps. One example is Lotus Retal, a community-based training center in Abu Dhabi that has provided education, skills development, and livelihood support since 2017.⁵

This brief analyzes Lotus Retal as a locally adapted model of complementary pathways in a context where asylum and resettlement are unavailable. Although not a formal protection program, it aligns with principles endorsed by the U.N. by providing access to work, education, and third-country opportunities. Lotus Retal facilitates such access by equipping refugees with the skills, networks, and support to allow them to pursue opportunities independently. It demonstrates how locally adapted models can bridge gaps between formal protection systems and refugee self-reliance, operating within the complementary pathways space that UNHCR identifies as essential for expanding durable solutions globally.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Abu Dhabi in 2025, this brief examines Lotus Retal's operations within the UAE's migration constraints. The research included five interviews with Lotus Retal staff and volunteers, observation of activities, and a review of internal and partnership documents. It also offers policy recommendations for strengthening refugee resilience in non-signatory contexts. The case is not intended for direct replication; rather, it aims to identify enabling conditions and mechanisms that may inform pathway-enabling approaches in comparable settings.

Humanitarian Infrastructure in the United Arab Emirates

Domestic Legal Frameworks

The UAE is a major global humanitarian donor, contributing over \$3.5 billion (USD) in aid and operating humanitarian hubs such as Emirates Humanitarian City and Dubai Humanitarian, which provide urgent care and relief to countries and populations in crisis.⁶ Domestically, the UAE does not recognize refugee status. Displaced persons instead fall under existing immigration and labor systems, including visitor and temporary visas as well as the kafala sponsorship model.⁷

Under kafala, all migrants must hold a valid residency permit, typically linked to employment or family sponsorship.⁸ If employment ends, residency is automatically lost, and individuals may lose their legal status or, in some cases, become de facto stateless. When people cannot return to their home countries due to conflict, disaster, or risk of persecution, they may also be unable to leave the UAE. Protection needs then fall outside the scope of existing laws, creating a structural dilemma for the state.

The UAE has occasionally adopted discretionary measures, such as the 2018 resolution granting one-year, renewable permits for nationals of war-affected countries, and the temporary hosting of Afghan evacuees in 2021.⁹ These measures demonstrate a willingness to respond to humanitarian needs on a case-by-case basis, but international involvement remains limited.

Philanthropic Foundations and De Facto Support

UNHCR has maintained an office in the UAE since 1986, cooperating with authorities and philanthropic organizations to provide legal aid, education, health referrals, and support to a small caseload of asylum seekers and stateless persons.¹⁰ In the absence of an asylum law or integration pathway,

most UNHCR cases are referred for third-country resettlement, and Emirati officials are generally cooperative in this process. However, because UNHCR's mandate is limited, the bulk of assistance to displaced families is delivered through UAE-based charitable foundations.

For instance, the Big Heart Foundation, Emirates Red Crescent, and Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives provide food, housing, health care, and education to undocumented migrants and vulnerable families. Targeted programs, such as the Sheikha Fatima Fund for Refugee Women and Children and the Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair Refugee Education Fund, provide maternal care, counseling, and scholarships to displaced youth and women from Arab war-torn countries. Though technically non-governmental, these initiatives are led by ruling family members and operate in close coordination with ministries and governmental agencies.¹¹ Together, they constitute the UAE's de facto humanitarian infrastructure, serving as a replacement for formal protection mechanisms. By delivering aid, education, and legal referrals, they create a state-aligned, yet extra-legal model of refugee support. Within this hybrid system, initiatives such as Lotus Retal complement state-linked humanitarianism with community-driven models that emphasize skills, resilience, and self-reliance.

A Business Model for Service Delivery

Legal and Operational Structure of Lotus Retal

The Lotus Holistic Retal Institute for Training in the Development of Personal Competencies was established in 2017 and operates legally in Abu Dhabi as a registered sole proprietorship. Under a commercial license covering language instruction and personal skills development, Lotus Retal offers English and Arabic classes, technology courses, and certified vocational programs. To sustain revenue, the center also rents its facilities to licensed training partners

and hosts community events. Up to 40% of its annual income is reinvested into refugee-focused initiatives under Basmat Amal, which includes a joint program with UNHCR to support families from war-affected countries residing in the UAE.¹² Since its founding, over 400 children and adults have benefited from Basmat Amal's initiatives.

Partnerships and Funding Channels

This business-based model distinguishes Lotus Retal from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Registering a non-profit organization in the UAE to serve people and raise funds domestically is a highly regulated process.¹³ It requires high-level governmental approval and subjects operational activities, particularly fundraising, to strict federal and local regulations. In contrast, a business license can be obtained and renewed with minimal bureaucracy, allowing Lotus Retal to operate within existing legal frameworks while avoiding extensive oversight. The center has only two paid staff members, a manager, and a receptionist, both on symbolic salaries, and relies on over 70 volunteers registered through Abu Dhabi's Department of Community Development (DCD).¹⁴

Despite being a sole proprietorship, Lotus Retal can still play a humanitarian role through partnership-based funding arrangements. It cannot directly solicit donations or apply for NGO-specific grants, but it can receive funding as an implementing partner where eligibility is not restricted to NGOs.¹⁵ To achieve this, Lotus Retal works through legally recognized channels, collaborating with philanthropic organizations such as the Al Ghurair Foundation, corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, religious endowments, and individual benefactors. Resources are typically routed through licensed NGOs or international agencies, which then contract Lotus Retal to deliver services such as computer refurbishment training, women's sewing cooperatives, and early childhood education programs. In individual cases, Lotus Retal matches private sponsors with specific refugee families, ensuring transparency and compliance with UAE law.

The Lotus Retal Initiative and Complementary Pathways

Role as a Connector and Pathway Enabler

Lotus Retal does not facilitate legal entry into the UAE or act as an admission or visa channel. Instead, it supports UNHCR-referred individuals who are already in the country, enabling them to stabilize their status through skills development and onward pathways. As an implementing partner, Lotus Retal is not responsible for verifying legal status, which is handled through UNHCR. Many of those referred are unable to return to their countries of origin and require support while regularizing their status in the UAE. This small caseload operates in a legal grey zone, highlighting the need for clearer frameworks to support community-based actors in non-signatory contexts. In this respect, Lotus Retal acts as a connector or a pathway enabler, supporting refugees to pursue legal pathways independently through UAE-based institutions or third-country programs.

Network-Based Pathway Enabling

The emergence of Lotus Retal reflects how pathway-enabling mechanisms can develop when regulatory space aligns with institutional experience and established networks. Central to this process was the vision of its cofounder, May Kadkoy, a former UNHCR official with 35 years of experience in refugee protection in the UAE.¹⁶ After retiring in 2017, she mobilized her personal connections to U.N. colleagues, government officials, influential Emiratis, and expatriate communities to establish Lotus Retal as one of the few grassroots initiatives operating legally in the UAE.¹⁷

Today, Lotus Retal draws on more than 70 expatriate volunteers, many of them mothers from diverse backgrounds, who deliver classes and use their social and professional networks to link beneficiaries with jobs and educational

opportunities in the UAE and abroad.¹⁸ While these connections are unique to this case, they offer a broader policy insight: When regulatory space, institutional trust, and professional networks converge, pathway-enabling mechanisms can emerge — even in restrictive contexts.

Table 1 — Lotus Retail: Mechanisms for Enabling Complementary Pathways

Mechanism	How Lotus Retail Applies It
Skills-Based Pathways	Certified computer refurbishment, early childhood education, and digital marketing tracks codesigned with employers (job-placement targets agreed in advance); personal trainer and gym instructor certification; front-line sales (cashier training); game and application development; graphic design; job fairs; leveraging personal networks to connect employees with employers or share resumes
Education Pathways	Basmat Amal funds school fees and after-school tutoring; summer STEM camp with Khalifa University; Strive English for adults in collaboration with New York University in Abu Dhabi; remedial and bridging school programs (Syrian Smart School)
Network and Community Mobilization	More than 70 registered volunteers, chiefly expatriate mothers, broker sales channels (e.g., airport duty-free, international schools) for the women’s sewing cooperative
Multi-Stakeholder Agreement	Functions as a supplier of services to UNHCR and other charitable foundations in the UAE (Al Ghurair Foundation) and CSR arms of local businesses and institutions, including universities

Source: Author analysis.

This network-based model builds directly on Kadkoy's social capital, translating personal connections into institutional partnerships. At the local level, Lotus Retal collaborates with Emirati charitable foundations, such as the Al Ghurair Foundation, and contracts with UAE businesses through CSR partnerships with humanitarian organizations. It registers its volunteers through Abu Dhabi's DCD to ensure legality and official recognition. At the international level, partnerships with UNHCR and global universities add referrals, legitimacy, and access to accredited training and higher education pathways. Through this layered network, Lotus Retal connects refugees to diverse opportunity structures that embody UNHCR's complementary pathways in practice.

Localization and Refugee Self-Reliance

Core Assets for Self-Reliance

Lotus Retal also aligns with UNHCR's complementary pathways framework by focusing on refugee empowerment and self-reliance — filling protection gaps where formal systems are absent. While Lotus Retal does not provide a formal admission or resettlement channel, it functions as an enabling intermediary preparing refugees to become eligible for or pursue complementary pathways elsewhere.

Lotus Retal achieves this through three core assets:

1. **Market-aligned skills training**, providing accredited certifications and practical experience valued by employers.
2. **Privileged social networks**, connecting beneficiaries to corporate, philanthropic, and expatriate communities otherwise out of reach.
3. **Revenue-recycling business model**, reinvesting 40% of annual income into refugee-focused programs and sustaining services without heavy reliance on external aid.

Education and Vocational Programs

A notable example is Basmat Amal, Lotus Retal's flagship education and training program. Its core mission is to connect refugees and vulnerable families with accredited schooling and vocational pathways in the UAE, while also preparing them for reintegration at home or onward opportunities in resettlement countries. The program is funded primarily by the Al Ghurair Foundation, which focuses on children and women from war-affected countries in the Arab world. Its support ensures that displaced individuals can both access and remain in education, a significant hurdle in the UAE, where school fees range from AED 10,000 to 15,000 per year (approximately \$2,700–\$4,100 USD). To address these barriers, Lotus Retal supplements institutional support with personal donors, matching individual sponsors with students to cover costs. In this way, Basmat Amal embodies the localization principle, mobilizing UAE-based resources, expatriate networks, and philanthropic funding to sustain refugee access to education and skills, ultimately fostering pathways to self-reliance.

Another key collaboration is the partnership with the Smart Syrian School which is accredited by the Syrian Ministry of Education and recognized in the UAE. This partnership offers an accelerated track, allowing students to complete two years of coursework in one year. Instruction is delivered online by the school, while Lotus Retal provides in-person support to address learning gaps for children who have been out of school for an extended period of time. This allows refugee students to regain lost years of education and secure certification accepted by UAE schools. Though resource-intensive, the model exemplifies localization by combining regional accreditation with UAE-based volunteer delivery.

Basmat Amal also offers a range of certified training programs tailored to women and youth. For women, it provides sewing training, distributes sewing machines for home-based production, and has enabled 10 participants to

complete Montessori classroom assistant training, giving them entry into the early childhood education sector. On the technology side, 80 beneficiaries have graduated from courses ranging from basic computer literacy to advanced modules in filmmaking and digital communication. All training is delivered in partnership with certified institutes, ensuring that every course results in a UAE-recognized qualification. This combination of accredited education, market-linked training, and volunteer mobilization not only increases refugees' chances of securing formal employment but also reduces long-term dependency on aid.

Building Better Futures

From Training to Employment and Self-Reliance

Lotus Retal's Building Better Futures program demonstrates how grassroots initiatives can convert short-term training into pathways for self-reliance. On May 9, 2025, the center organized a combined graduation and job fair for 140 participants who had completed accredited training across multiple sectors. By leveraging its volunteer network, Lotus Retal mobilized family members employed in various corporations, approached businesses directly, and partnered with organizations to connect participants' new skills to employment prospects in the UAE. According to Lotus Retal, 96 beneficiaries reported positive livelihood outcomes, including formal employment, micro-enterprise development, or progression into further vocational opportunities. This represents nearly 70% of the cohort, a significant outcome given the barriers refugees face to legal employment and income generation in the UAE.

Education and Resettlement Pathways

The impact extends beyond immediate job placement. Some graduates have used their training to access education or employment in resettlement

countries such as Canada, particularly through Lotus Retal's Strive English program, which supports adults across refugee families.²⁰ By combining accredited training, job placement support, and follow-up, Lotus Retal positions beneficiaries not only to enter the labor market but also to avoid segregation into parallel systems. Instead, they are absorbed within the broader expatriate population, illustrating how hybrid, volunteer-driven models can foster both inclusion and self-reliance.

Managing Risks and Ensuring Safeguards

However, this approach also carries limitations. The UAE's labor system, particularly the kafala framework, is associated with well-documented risks of precarity and employer dependency. For this reason, community-based actors working with persons of concern must operate within established UAE regulatory frameworks, ensure safeguarding mechanisms when linking beneficiaries to employers, and collaborate with institutions that demonstrate compliance with labor standards. Recent labor law reforms including enhanced mechanisms for labor dispute resolution, create a regulatory space that community-based actors can operate within.²¹ However, further safeguards may be needed to prevent informal or employer-dependent arrangements that heighten precarity for beneficiaries over time.

These livelihood outcomes demonstrate how complementary pathways can function within existing UAE systems rather than outside them. They reflect UNHCR's rationale that such pathways offer safe and regulated avenues that expand access to protection and inclusion by working within existing legal frameworks in host countries.²² Rather than replicating asylum systems, complementary pathways adapt to local contexts, including labor laws, migration policies, and licensing structures. Lotus Retal exemplifies this approach by working through UAE-licensed structures, mobilizing different stakeholders, and leveraging expatriate networks. In doing so, it expands access to skills and opportunity while remaining embedded in the country's legal realities.

Policy Recommendations

Lotus Retal illustrates how community-based actors can enable complementary pathways in non-signatory contexts. Strengthening such models requires practical steps:

1. **Enable hybrid humanitarian-business structures**

Small, legally registered entities, such as sole proprietorships, can deliver refugee-focused services in contexts where NGO registration is highly regulated. Establishing a dedicated category for humanitarian-oriented enterprises would provide legal clarity, reduce operational risk, and allow such actors to apply for tax exemptions, reduced rent for humanitarian use, and access to community facilities and training spaces. This approach would preserve flexibility while ensuring oversight and accountability.

2. **Strengthen complementary pathways through skills and accreditation**

Humanitarian actors, donors, and educational institutions should link accredited skills programs to migration and scholarship pathways, both locally — through employment opportunities or university admissions — and internationally — through education or labor mobility programs. Formal recognition of certifications and clearer routes for credential transfer would expand access to safe and regulated opportunities, consistent with UNHCR guidance on complementary labor mobility and education pathways.

3. **Formalize community-based connector models**

Complementary pathways rely on trusted intermediaries at the community level, such as Lotus Retal, which operates as a delivery partner for UNHCR and philanthropic entities and implements refugee-focused programs under existing legal frameworks. Humanitarian agencies and donors should replicate this model by contracting small, legally registered providers to deliver training, mentorship, and

employment support, and by providing coordination platforms, shared materials, and legal recognition to scale community-level delivery systems.

4. Leverage existing networks while safeguarding against precarity

To expand livelihood opportunities, connector models should mobilize social and professional networks through CSR partnerships, zakat channels that distribute charitable donations according to Islamic law, and registered volunteers. Without regulatory clarity, however, they risk exposing refugees to precarious labor conditions. Introducing light-touch regulation — such as basic employer vetting, volunteer safeguards, and streamlined oversight — would protect beneficiaries while preserving the flexibility that makes these initiatives effective. This approach could inform pathway-enabling strategies in both signatory and non-signatory contexts.

5. Promote localization models in restrictive contexts

Models like Lotus Retail should be documented as examples of legally compliant, locally adapted humanitarian delivery in restrictive contexts. They demonstrate how complementary pathways can operate within migration systems built on temporary residence rather than legal permanence. Including Gulf-based cases in protection debates would expand the evidence on non-Western approaches to inclusion and self-reliance and help ensure that localization strategies reflect diverse regional realities.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Irfan Mushtaq for research assistance.

Author

Najwa Belkziz, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer in the arts and humanities at New York University Abu Dhabi. She earned her Ph.D. in history from the University of Melbourne and a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University. Her research focuses on irregular migration, refugee protection, and informal and complementary pathways in the Gulf and the wider Middle East and North Africa. She has previously worked on refugee protection and migration programming, including with the International Organization for Migration. Her current research examines community-based pathway enablers and secondary migration from the United Arab Emirates to resettlement countries.

Notes

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Refugee Data Finder," November 4, 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>.
2. UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024* (2024), <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/global-trends-report-2024.pdf>; Benedicta Solf and Katherine Rehberg, "The Resettlement Gap: A Record Number of Global Refugees, but Few Are Resettled," Migration Policy Institute, October 21, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-resettlement-gap>.
3. UNHCR, *Complementary Pathways and Family Reunification* (2023), <https://emergency.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Starter%20pack%20Complementary%20Pathways%20and%20Family%20Reunification%202023.pdf>.
4. UNHCR, "UAE Fact Sheet," February 2019, <https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20250602160806/https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20UAE%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20February%202019.pdf>.
5. "About Us," Lotus Retal, <https://lotusretal.com/>.

Notes (cont'd)

6. "UAE and South Sudan Organize Humanitarian Visit to Gorom Refugee Camp in Juba Alongside International Delegations," United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 20, 2025, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/MediaHub/News/2025/3/20/20-3-2025-UAE-Sudan>; "Emirates Humanitarian City," Abu Dhabi Media Office, <https://www.mediaoffice.abudhabi/en/topic/emirates-humanitarian-city/>; and "More Than 20 Years of Humanitarian Action," Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, <https://dubaihumanitarian.ae/>.
7. "What Is the Kafala System?," Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), updated November 18, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system>.
8. Hirotaka Fujibayashi, "The Politics of Refugee Reception in the Arabian Gulf: Comparative Evidence from Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2025): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2476569>.
9. "UAE to Grant Nationals of Countries Facing War a One-Year Stay Permit," WAM, June 18, 2018, <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395302695114>; "17,600 Afghans Hosted by the UAE Prior to Departure to Final Destinations," UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 27, 2025, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2025/7/24/24-7-2025-uae-afghanistan>.
10. UNHCR, "The United Arab Emirates," UNHCR Rights Mapping and Analysis Platform, <https://rimap.unhcr.org/countries/united-arab-emirates>.
11. UNHCR, "The United Arab Emirates"; Camilla Della Giovampaola and Giuseppe Ugazio, "Mapping the Network: Identifying UAE Philanthropies' Partners in Education," *Comparative Education Review* 68, no. 4 (2024): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1086/733482>.
12. "Basmat Amal: Vocational Training for Vulnerable Migrants," People Power Inclusion, <https://www.ppi-groupepos.org/en/basmat-amal-vocational-training-for-vulnerable-migrants/>.
13. "Ways of Doing Charity in the UAE," UAE Government Platform, <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/charity-and-humanitarian-work/ways-of-doing-charity-in-the-uae>.
14. "Establishing Your Business," Department of Economic Development, November 30, 2025, <https://www.added.gov.ae/en/set-up/establish-your-business>; Maya Motlik, Lotus Retail Manager, interview with author, 2025.
15. Maya Motlik, Lotus Retail Manager, interview with author, 2025.
16. Haneen Dajani, "Abu Dhabi Centre Delivers Free Education to Low-Income Families Who Escaped Horrors of War," *The National*, June 26, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/education/abu-dhabi-centre-delivers-free-education-to-low-income-families-who-escaped-horrors-of-war-1.1248932>.
17. May Kadkoy, Lotus Retail Director, interview with author, 2025.

Notes (cont'd)

18. Maya Motlik, Lotus Retail Manager, interview with author, 2025.
19. "About Smart Syrian School," Smart Syrian School, <https://smartsyrianschool.com/en/>.
20. Sarah Allen, Volunteer Coordinator, interview with author, 2025.
21. "Protection of Workers' Rights," UAE Government Platform, <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/employment-in-the-private-sector/labour-rights>.
22. UNHCR, "Complementary Pathways for Admission to Third Countries," <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/solutions/complementary-pathways-admission-third-countries>.
23. Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam. It requires Muslims whose savings reach a minimum threshold to give 2.5 percent of their wealth each year to those in need.



TURKEY'S EXCEPTIONAL CITIZENSHIP AND LEGAL LIMBO FOR DISPLACED MENA NATIONALS

Duygu Altunoğlu Yıldız

Turkey's post-2016 exceptional citizenship policy offers a formal route out of legal limbo for a subset of displaced nationals from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The pathway is selective and discretionary, often invitation-based and at times opaque. For some, naturalization reduces legal uncertainty and expands mobility. Yet status does not automatically translate into membership, and new citizens may still face barriers in employment, housing, access to services, and everyday belonging.¹ This brief addresses two questions: Who gains access to exceptional citizenship, and to what extent does citizenship provide durable inclusion?

Methodology

This analysis draws on 23 semi-structured interviews conducted via online teleconferencing in February and March 2024 with displaced MENA nationals who obtained Turkish citizenship through diverse routes. It also builds on recent scholarship that describes the post-2016 design as selective/illiberal inclusion, where capital, skills, and executive discretion shape outcomes, and contrasts it with earlier differential inclusion under Temporary Protection, where partial access coexisted with precarity.² A critical but constructive stance is applied: Exceptional citizenship can succeed only when paired with transparency, minimal review, and modest post-naturalization support that help status translate into everyday inclusion.³

Policy Context and Concepts

Since 2011, Turkey has been one of the world's leading refugee-hosting countries, scaling up de facto administrative arrangements to manage displacement at scale; however, legal pathways to durable status have remained limited for most Syrians, with mechanisms such as exceptional citizenship operating through narrow, selective, and discretionary channels.⁴ After 2016, the state expanded exceptional citizenship via two principal channels: 1) invitation-based naturalization for selected displaced people, most visibly Syrians; and 2) investment-linked routes, for example real estate, bank deposits, alongside small discretionary tracks for "persons deemed necessary."⁵ Scholars describe this architecture as selective or illiberal inclusion: Access is mediated by executive discretion and tends to privilege skills, education, or capital, yielding stratified membership — legal status without equal access or belonging.⁶

By contrast, temporary protection, the primary legal-administrative framework through which Syrian nationals have been granted protection status in Turkey since 2011, is often characterized as differential inclusion, where basic services were accessible and yet precarity persisted.⁷ There is

precedent beyond Syrians; Turkey has, at times, granted citizenship to non-Syrian refugee groups when this aligned with state priorities, underscoring that exceptional admission is a repeatable political instrument, not a one-off response.⁸

Theoretically, this pattern resonates with James F. Hollifield's liberal paradox — states benefit from open markets and mobility yet hesitate to fully liberalize migrant rights — and with Katharina Natter's illiberal paradox, where non-liberal or hybrid regimes selectively open legal channels while consolidating political control through opacity and discretion.⁹ Read together, and against a MENA governance lens that highlights host-state calibration of inclusion to geopolitical and domestic agendas, the post-2016 design appears flexible yet selective, humanitarian in narrative yet highly strategic in practice.¹⁰

Study Design and Data

To connect formal design with lived experience, a semi-structured protocol was employed, focusing on access routes, documentation sequences, waiting times, use of brokers or lawyers, and post-naturalization experiences. Interviews were conducted remotely via online teleconferencing in February and March 2024. Sampling was purposive due to topic sensitivity and aimed to capture route diversity, including higher education, company establishment, real estate purchase, bank deposits, and a small “persons deemed necessary” track, which applies to individuals whose citizenship is deemed necessary by the Turkish government, often due to exceptional contributions. The 23 participants — 13 women and 10 men — ranged from 19 to 65 years old, with Syrians and Iranians most common and a mix of employment statuses and education levels.

Interviews were conducted in Turkish, English, Arabic, or Persian, with professional interpreting provided as needed. Identities are anonymized as “Participant X, gender, age.” Fieldwork reflected the political sensitivity of naturalization: Concerns over security, stigma, and data protection led to

roughly 10 last-minute cancellations, and several participants explicitly requested that their employers, neighbors, or relatives not know about their citizenship acquisition.¹¹

Capability Over Vulnerability

Interview evidence indicates a consistent pattern: The pathway tends to favor capability — recognized qualifications, Turkish or English language skills, and stable income or assets — over humanitarian vulnerability. Participants with higher education or clear investment options perceived the citizenship pathway as attainable, while those lacking credentials or savings often reported dead ends. This aligns with research showing that the post-2016 design valorizes contribution — skills, capital — over need, producing layered access to rights.

“I bought a home after colleagues explained the investment route. It was the only clear path I could see.”¹² — Participant 8

“Friends told me exactly which documents I needed and to ‘just wait.’ I followed the steps and finally got the call.”¹³ — Participant 6

The effect is strategic temporality: Some are moved into permanence, while others remain indefinitely at the margins — a dynamic that mirrors differential inclusion during temporary protection, now reproduced inside a citizenship framework.¹⁴

Navigation Under Opacity

Participants described four practical channels of navigation to obtain citizenship: 1) invitation lists and security checks with unpredictable timing; 2) lawyer or broker support to avoid procedural mistakes and manage appointments; 3) investment routes with clearer thresholds but limited social

spillovers; and 4) higher-education routes for younger, credentialed applicants. The ability to decode the system — via language, social networks, or legal help — mattered as much as formal eligibility.

Several interviewees emphasized long waits without feedback, followed by sudden decisions.

*“Our lawyer handled everything. Honestly, without a lawyer, it is easy to make mistakes.”*¹⁵ — Participant 4

*“I went to the migration office many times. Speaking Turkish helped; otherwise, I couldn’t understand the instructions.”*¹⁶ — Participant 10

*“I kept asking for updates, but there was no information. And then suddenly it was done.”*¹⁷ — Participant 2

*“There were long periods with no updates, and then suddenly a call to sign papers.”*¹⁸ — Participant 9

These patterns highlight how procedural opacity and reliance on intermediaries shape access to citizenship. Navigating the system successfully often depended as much on social, linguistic, and legal resources as on formal eligibility, underscoring the selective and uneven nature of post-2016 inclusion.

After Naturalization

Citizenship clearly reduced legal limbo and improved mobility, including access to banking, travel, and the ability to sign contracts. Yet everyday inclusion often lagged. Discrimination at work, neighborhood stigma, and administrative misclassification — such as “foreigner” flags persisting in some databases — were recurring themes.¹⁹

*"I obtained citizenship in 2019; a bank employee still said, 'we can't open for foreigners,' and I had to insist I'm a Turkish citizen."*²⁰ — Participant 10

Recent research similarly shows that naturalization delivers legal certainty; however, without language support, equitable access to employment, and credible antidiscrimination mechanisms, a sense of belonging remains fragile. (21) In short, legal status is necessary but not sufficient for full inclusion.

Public Trust and the Politics of Discretion

Here, opacity refers to the limited transparency and predictability of the naturalization process, which makes decisions difficult to anticipate and verify and, in turn, undermines public trust. Several factors contribute to this opacity, including discretionary decision-making, uneven communication, reliance on intermediaries, and complex eligibility criteria. Opacity has trade-offs: On one hand, discretion allows for policy agility, signaling responsiveness to economic or diplomatic goals; on the other, it risks misinformation, politicization, and low institutional trust. In a polarized environment, even successful cases may not anchor public legitimacy if the rules are unclear.

Conclusion

Turkey's exceptional citizenship policy is a strategic experiment at the intersection of protracted displacement, legal inclusion, and state sovereignty. Since 2016, it has extended legal status and mobility to select displaced MENA nationals, most often those with skills, education, or capital. Yet its discretionary and opaque design can reproduce stratified membership and fragile trust.

The lesson is straightforward: Citizenship is necessary, but not sufficient. Pairing the pathway with light transparency, a minimal review step, and modest municipal support can help convert legal status into everyday

participation. Because Turkey's policy choices are highly influential in the region, a recalibrated model could inform context-sensitive reforms across other MENA states — not to export a template, but to share workable mechanisms that help legal status translate into a sense of belonging.

Policy Recommendations

Building on these findings, the following policy recommendations aim to strengthen the pathway from legal status to everyday inclusion while retaining the flexibility of exceptional citizenship.

1. **Introduce a light, independent review:** Establish a brief appeal window for negative decisions, managed by a small body adjacent to an existing equality or ombuds institution. This is not a heavy, court-like procedure; it provides a short fairness check that can stabilize trust without slowing throughput.
2. **Fund modest, local post-naturalization support:** Channel small grants to municipalities and civil society organizations for short language courses, job-matching, mentoring, and antidiscrimination guidance — including a hotline and workplace toolkits. These micro-interventions serve as hinges that help translate legal status into everyday inclusion.
3. **Balance capability with calibrated vulnerability:** Maintain contribution criteria — skills and capital — while adding explicit humanitarian considerations, such as chronic illness, elderly dependents, single-parent households, and statelessness, to avoid hard exclusions and strengthen social cohesion.

4. **Document and scale what works:** Establish a city-to-city learning loop, with a university center as knowledge partner, so municipalities can share practical templates, including language curricula, employer outreach strategies, and bias-reporting protocols. This approach also facilitates regional transfer to other MENA host countries.

5. **Clarify interagency coordination:** Publish a process map linking central authorities with municipalities, Turkey's Employment Agency (İŞKUR), banks, and registries to prevent "foreigner" flags from persisting post-naturalization, reduce administrative frictions, and realize the promise of citizenship.

Author

Duygu Altunoğlu Yıldız, Ph.D., is a lecturer at Kırklareli University in Turkey, affiliated with the International Relations Coordination Office. She holds a Ph.D. in political science and international relations from Istanbul University. Her research focuses on migration and citizenship policies, Syrian returns using digital methods, and TÜBİTAK-funded studies on international students in higher education.

Notes

1. Ayşe Serdar, "An Illiberal Inclusion? The AKP's Politics of Exceptional Citizenship," *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 1 (2023): 51–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2100699>; Wanda Spahl and August Österle, "Stratified Membership: Health Care Access for Urban Refugees in Turkey," *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019): article 1, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0148-0>.
2. Serdar, "An Illiberal Inclusion?"; Feyzi Baban et al., "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Pathways to Precarity, Differential Inclusion, and Negotiated Citizenship Rights," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 41–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1192996>.
3. Ayşen Üstübici, "The Impact of Externalized Migration Governance on Turkey: Technocratic Migration Governance and the Production of Differentiated Legal Status," *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019): article 46, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0159-x>.
4. Ahmet İçduygu and Evin Millet, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Insecure Lives in an Environment of Pseudo-Integration*, Text Working Paper no. 13 (Global Turkey in Europe, 2016), <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c15/syrian-refugees-turkey-insecure-lives-environment-pseudo-integration>.
5. Serdar, "An Illiberal Inclusion?"; Ayla Deniz and Sibel Can Çetinkaya, "Citizenship by Investment in Türkiye: Who Buys Citizenship and Why?," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 25, no. 2 (2023): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2023.2255025>.
6. Spahl and Österle, "Stratified Membership"; Üstübici, "The Impact of Externalized Migration Governance on Turkey."
7. Baban et al., "Syrian Refugees in Turkey."

Notes (cont'd)

8. Kelsey P. Norman, *Reluctant Reception: Refugees, Migration and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108900119>.
9. James F. Hollifield, "The Emerging Migration State," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 885–912, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00223.x>; Katharina Natter, *The Politics of Immigration Beyond Liberal States: Morocco and Tunisia in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009262668>.
10. Norman, *Reluctant Reception*.
11. Baban et al., "Syrian Refugees in Turkey"; Deniz and Çetinkaya, "Citizenship by Investment in Türkiye"; Deniz and Çetinkaya, "Intermediaries of Citizenship by Investment and Türkiye: 'Global Citizenship Market Grows with Us,'" *Globalizations* 21, no. 7 (2024): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2024.2336643>; Serdar, "An Illiberal Inclusion?"; and Zeynep Şahin-Mencütek and Soner Barthoma, "Governance of Citizenship in Turkey: Exceptional Citizenship for Syrians Amidst a Protracted Refugee Crisis," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 23, no. 3 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2025.2452906>.
12. Interview with Participant 8, male, aged 31, 2024.
13. Interview with Participant 6, female, aged 65, 2024.
14. Üstübici, "The Impact of Externalized Migration Governance on Turkey"; Spahl and Österle, "Stratified Membership"; and Mencütek and Barthoma, "Governance of Citizenship in Turkey."
15. Interview with Participant 4, female, aged 33, 2024.
16. Interview with Participant 10, female, aged 33, 2024.
17. Interview with Participant 2, female, aged 34, 2024.
18. Interview with Participant 9, male, aged 19, 2024.
19. Üstübici, "The Impact of Externalized Migration Governance on Turkey"; Spahl and Österle, "Stratified Membership"; and Mencütek and Barthoma, "Governance of Citizenship in Turkey."
20. Interview with Participant 10, female, aged 33, 2024.
21. Mencütek and Barthoma, "Governance of Citizenship in Turkey"; Suzan Ilcan et al., "The Ambiguous Architecture of Precarity: Temporary Protection, Everyday Living and Migrant Journeys of Syrian Refugees," *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 4, nos. 1–2 (2018): 51–70, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMBS.2018.091226>; and Baban et al., "Syrian Refugees in Turkey."



RETURN ASPIRATIONS OF SYRIAN REFUGEE YOUTH IN JORDAN

Antea Enna and Ayat Nashwan

The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024 has sparked renewed conversations about Syrian refugee return. This development significantly influences political debates in host countries and scholarly research concerning the future of Syrian refugees in the region.¹ While political change in Syria creates new opportunities for Syrian refugees, the process of return remains complex and requires a nuanced, multidimensional approach.²

With over a million Syrian refugees accommodated since 2011, Jordan's economy, infrastructure, and social cohesion have been under significant

pressure.³ While policies such as the Jordan Compact sought to integrate refugees economically, labor market restrictions persist, and opportunities for Syrian refugees remain limited.⁴ Recent political changes have led Jordan to favor voluntary repatriation; however, a lasting solution remains unclear at the political and humanitarian levels.

Building on earlier analyses of humanitarian frameworks and return-related issues, this brief examines the return perspectives of 1.5-generation Syrian youth, meaning refugees who left Syria as children or adolescents and have grown up largely in Jordan, navigating dual cultural identities and unique challenges.⁵ Their return considerations differ significantly from those of families with young children or elderly dependents. Using qualitative methods, this brief examines how these youth assess repatriation before and after the fall of the Assad regime, integrating insights from experts, practitioners, and policymakers to analyze return policies amid political, social, and economic transitions.

This brief also contributes to ongoing debates on durable solutions by analyzing how 1.5-generation Syrian refugees view their futures and the possibility of return. Findings show that under Assad's regime, many 1.5-generation Syrian refugees regarded return as incompatible with their life goals, preferring to remain in Jordan or seek opportunities elsewhere. After the government change, the perspective of return changed sharply, revealing a more nuanced perception of this possibility in the future, especially if certain conditions, such as economic stability, resource availability, and security, are met.

Methodology

The qualitative approach included two rounds of in-depth interviews (IDIs) with Syrian refugees aged 19–30 and 10 key informant interviews (KIIs) with academics, practitioners, and policymakers. The first round of IDIs was

conducted in the summer of 2024, focusing on participants' future aspirations and their potential return to Syria under the Assad regime. It included seven women and eight men. The second round of IDIs involved follow-up interviews conducted from April to June 2025 and included 11 of the former participants, three women and eight men, aimed at capturing shifts in return perspectives following Assad's fall. IDIs rounds took place in Northern Jordan, covering urban centers such as Irbid, Mafraq, and Jerash, as well as rural villages including Sal and Ramtha. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes and patterns across IDIs and KIs. This approach allowed a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges faced by the 1.5-generation Syrian refugees in Jordan and their views on repatriation. The two levels of analysis aimed to inform actionable recommendations for policymakers, donors, U.N. agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Unpacking Syrian Refugees' Return from Jordan

Geopolitical and Security Constraints

Many participants highlighted the need to address the issue of repatriation within the framework of a complex and ever-evolving geopolitical landscape. Numerous interviewees emphasized that the prevailing insecurity and instability in Syria, as well as in the broader region, hinder any evaluations that could guarantee the dignified and safe return of Syrian refugees. All participants highlighted various external influences, such as the Israeli military's actions and occupation in Southern Syria, alongside internal conflicts involving violence against Alawite and Christian communities in March 2025, as well as other incidents of violence. They underscored that these brutal events have fostered a pervasive sense of insecurity among refugee groups in neighboring countries, making them hesitant to return to their homeland.

Symbolic and Relational Factors

In addition to geopolitical dynamics and domestic turmoil, the process of return is further complicated by symbolic and relational factors. A significant challenge lies in the absence of a government-led reconciliation strategy that promotes national cohesion on both symbolic and practical fronts.

Interviewees stressed the need for such a framework to build trust among social groups and prevent conflict relapse. Without it, many refugees struggle to envision living alongside former opponents or regime supporters.

Structural and Economic Barriers

Interviews indicated that various structural elements hinder the return of Syrian refugees. Key factors include weak property laws, poor economic conditions, limited reintegration services, and stalled reconstruction reforms. Moreover, even though most sanctions were lifted in 2025, persistent issues such as economic volatility, lack of job opportunities, and the devastation of housing continue to dissuade many refugees from returning.

“The return issue is complicated by property disputes, including destroyed homes, lack of compensation, missing ownership proof, and cases of others occupying or selling displaced people’s properties.”⁶

Discussions highlighted how Jordan’s crisis management and donor relationships influence repatriation policy. While most informants acknowledged a generally favorable relationship between Jordan and its international partners, some raised concerns that donor policies often shape this dynamic, relegating Jordan to the role of a mere executor of external agendas. This situation may clarify Jordan's measured stance on forced repatriation in contrast to other host nations, as well as its relatively open attitude towards Syrian refugees. Informants suggested that Jordan has

utilized the refugee crisis to garner international assistance, revealing that certain government officials have increasingly asserted that refugees will remain in Jordan as long as international financial support is secured for their continued presence.

Although Jordan officially supports voluntary return in line with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it has also applied indirect pressure. Indeed, as explained by both Syrian refugee youth and informants, the government has raised the fees of work permits for Syrians and increased controls in workplaces, complicating their circumstances and diminishing their employment prospects. All participants reported that escalating living costs and the rising expenses associated with obtaining work permits are prompting many Syrian refugees, individuals, and families to contemplate return as a means of addressing these financial challenges.

Individual Versus Collective Decision-Making

Informants emphasized that the decision to return is not a collective one, but rather an individual or household-level decision, shaped by personal history, emotional ties, and lived experiences. Moreover, youth refugees articulated, based on their personal narratives and reflections, that each family or individual carries unique emotional experiences related to both Syria and Jordan, which significantly impact their decision to return or remain, despite the direct or indirect pressures they face.

The contrast between collective and individual perspectives highlights how individual needs have often been overlooked in host and destination countries during the return process. As many respondents have indicated, it is essential to consider the interests of both nations and ensure effective collaboration among various stakeholders to adequately assist Syrian refugees throughout their journey and possible return. The decline of aid in Jordan, the absence of

clear referral pathways in Syria, and the poor coordination between countries were identified as some of the main obstacles to preparing for return and assisting refugees.

The 1.5-Generation Perspective on Return

Shifts in Perspective After Regime Change

While the first round of interviews showed that many refugees from the 1.5-generation, youth who left Syria as minors and came of age in Jordan, were reluctant to return to Syria, recent political shifts and stricter refugee policies in Jordan have led to more diverse views. Although they all maintain a strong emotional connection to Jordan, having spent the majority of their lives there, some have experienced a resurgence of patriotism in the wake of political changes in their homeland. Regardless of their intentions, all participants expressed relief at the fall of the Assad regime.

Cases of Return and Planned Return

Two participants returned to Syria: a woman to her hometown and a man to Damascus, despite coming from a different region. Their experiences varied significantly, but both were driven by financial struggles in Jordan that stemmed from restrictive policies toward Syrian refugees. The 23-year-old woman did not make the decision to return independently; rather, she followed her family's choice, viewing the move as an opportunity to advance her career in a context where job prospects in Jordan are limited. In contrast, the 30-year-old man returned alone, motivated by both financial hardship and emotional connection to his home country. His participation in the 2011 anti-government protests further shaped his decision, illustrating how political transformation can influence return decision-making processes.

*"I had to leave Jordan due to family and financial circumstances; and I knew that by returning to Syria, I would have to start from zero. It was a difficult decision."*⁷

Two participants indicated they were planning to return to Syria. One, who had shown interest in going back during the first round of interviews, confirmed his intention to continue his education in Damascus, viewing the move as a fresh start for him and his family. The other participant, who had initially dismissed the idea of returning for herself or her family due to safety concerns and her father's historical opposition to the Assad government, was later reconsidering due to the financial challenges facing her family in Jordan and the recent political changes in Syria. Conversations with these two individuals revealed that their choices to return were shaped not only by the limited opportunities and uncertain future in Jordan but also by their personal and familial histories, as well as their experiences of exile and persecution in their country of origin.

Four other participants who had previously expressed reluctance about the prospect of returning to Syria later demonstrated a newfound interest in making the journey home. This transformation is primarily motivated by a rekindled affection for their country alongside practical employment necessities. While there was a collective acknowledgment of their emotional ties to Jordan, some participants highlighted concerns about the practicality of investing in a country that may soon necessitate the return of refugees. Nevertheless, in light of the prevailing instability in Syria, the majority emphasized the importance of postponing decisions to invest in businesses or refurbish family residences until they could assess the situation in Syria more thoroughly, particularly regarding salary levels that did not meet expectations and the scarcity of essential services.

“My intention is to move back to Syria when the conditions are favorable. Beyond just personal safety, I also need to assess the economic situation, including whether electricity is available and if well-paying jobs can be secured.”⁸

Economic and Practical Motivations

The remaining participants, including two who relocated to a third host country, did not express any intention of returning to Syria. Despite indicating a desire not to return, all participants emphasized that the constraints associated with the limitations imposed on employment opportunities served as an indirect coercive measure from the Jordanian government, encouraging their return. This information, which also surfaced during KIIIs, illustrates how, following the institutional shifts in Syria, the Jordanian authorities have subtly, if not overtly, communicated specific expectations.

The IDIs’ findings indicate that, despite a profound emotional attachment to their host nation and limited knowledge of Syria, along with the potential challenges they may face upon repatriation, the youth residing in Jordan experiencing long-term displacement exhibit different stances regarding the topic of return. These differences stem from economic challenges and limited occupational opportunities in Jordan, leading many to contemplate relocating to Europe, the Gulf, or returning to Syria. Only a small number envision their future in Jordan and are aware that this future outlook can change if the Jordanian government decides to push for repatriation for all Syrian refugees.

“As a Syrian refugee, I don't envision a future for myself in Jordan, a situation that has frankly led me to a state of hopelessness. Nevertheless, Jordan holds a special place in my heart, as it's where I grew up. Returning to Syria, however, would only result in a different form of alienation. I am looking [for] a way to migrate elsewhere.”⁹

Family Versus Individual Decision-Making

Moreover, according to IDIs and KIs, the decision-making process regarding youth repatriation to Syria is different from other reference groups. For example, both youth and families view economic factors and limited opportunities as key motivators; however, our results show that families often prioritize their children's educational needs first, delaying their return to Syria until the end of the academic year and prioritizing family responsibilities over financial issues. In contrast, the situation for non-married individuals aged 19 to 30 is considerably more intricate, heavily influenced by personal and familial circumstances, as well as financial needs and concerns about the conditions in their country of origin, particularly for the younger individuals who have no prior experience of it.

Key Findings

The findings indicate that the issue of repatriation is complex and requires a comprehensive and tailored strategy. Although the humanitarian discourse predominantly exhibits a political character and influence, often adopting a top-down perspective, it is crucial to recognize that repatriation is not a collective decision but rather an individual or familial choice influenced by numerous factors. This shift in viewpoint enables the customization of political and humanitarian efforts to address the specific needs of Syrian refugees, also targeting vulnerable demographics such as the 1.5-generation.

A more tailored intervention would facilitate the identification of refugees' needs in Syria and in their host nations, equipping them with essential information to make informed decisions about their return, as well as providing necessary services and support throughout the repatriation process and upon their arrival. Thus, to facilitate the safe and dignified repatriation of Syrian refugees, it is essential to implement strategies at multiple levels, encompassing both policy frameworks and programmatic initiatives.

Policy and Program Recommendations

Syrian Government

1. **Develop a youth-centered reconciliation and reintegration framework** for 1.5-generation returnees, including mentorship, community-building, and psychosocial support to ease identity and adaptation challenges.
2. **Prioritize educational continuity and credential recognition** for returning youth by establishing clear pathways for Jordanian qualifications, offering catch-up programs, and providing tailored scholarships for 1.5-generation returnees.
3. **Develop targeted employment and vocational programs** for returning youth, including apprenticeships, entrepreneurship support, and job placement, in partnership with international organizations.
4. **Launch a nationwide reconstruction and investment strategy** to improve housing, jobs, and living conditions, ensuring efforts extend beyond major cities to promote balanced development across the country.

Jordanian Government

1. **Ensure ongoing education and skills development** for Syrian refugee youth in Jordan while supporting Syria's reconstruction, maintaining access until safe and sustainable return conditions are established.
2. **Support informed, voluntary return** by allowing exploratory visits to Syria, formulating employment policies, and maintaining work permits to prevent premature, economically driven returns.
3. **Collaborate with national and international partners** to offer age-sensitive return counseling tailored to the distinct needs and decision-making processes of potential returnees.

International and Local Partners

1. **Strengthen collaboration among international and local organizations** to establish cross-border referral systems that ensure safe, coordinated refugee returns and effective reporting of protection and healthcare cases.
2. **Develop youth-centered livelihood programs** targeting the youth's employment barriers — such as limited experience, education gaps, and weak networks — by promoting training and job opportunities in high-growth sectors like technology, reconstruction, and services in post-conflict Syria.
3. **Create peer support networks** linking 1.5-generation youth in Jordan who are considering returning with young returnees in Syria. These networks would enable the exchange of realistic information about living conditions, opportunities, and challenges.
4. **Develop specialized programs for 1.5-generation youth** that bridge host and origin country contexts. These should include language refresher courses in Arabic dialects, cultural orientation on contemporary Syria, and preparation for reintegration challenges faced by those returning to a country they barely remember.

Authors

Antea Enna, Ph.D., is a MSCA postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Economics at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and a visiting fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. Her research examines social stability and cohesion in Lebanon and Jordan. Her broader interests include sociopolitical conflict, the impact of social policies on social stability and cohesion, forced migration, and geopolitics in the Levant.

Ayat Nashwan, Ph.D., is a full professor of sociology and social work at Yarmouk University in Jordan and an associate professor of sociology at the University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. She has served as head of department at both universities and as assistant dean for accreditation and quality assurance, and directed the Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Forced Migration Studies Center, becoming the first woman to lead these units. Her research focuses on migration, refugee studies, social policy, gender, and education, with more than 50 publications, including numerous articles in Scopus-indexed journals. She has led and contributed to multiple externally funded projects on refugee integration, social protection, gender inequality, and sustainable development.

Notes

1. Zeynep Şahin-Mencütek, "The Geopolitics of Returns: Geopolitical Reasoning and Space-Making in Turkey's Repatriation Regime," *Geopolitics* 28, no. 3 (2023): 1079–1105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2081550>; Tamirace Fakhoury and Derya Ozkul, "Syrian Refugees' Return from Lebanon," *Forced Migration Review* 62 (2019): 26–28, <https://www.fmreview.org/return/>; Fakhoury, "Refugee Return and Fragmented Governance in the Host State: Displaced Syrians in the Face of Lebanon's Divided Politics," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2021): 162–180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1762485>; Fakhoury and Şahin-Mencütek, "The Geopolitics of Return Migration in the International System," *Geopolitics* 28, no. 3 (2023): 959–978, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2187981>; and Ala Alrababah et al., "The Dynamics of Refugee Return: Syrian Refugees and Their Migration Intentions," *British Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 4 (2023): 1108–1131, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000667>.
2. Şahin-Mencütek, "Conceptual Complexity About Return Migration of Refugees/Asylum Seekers," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 59, no. 7 (2024): 2125–2138, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241283651>.
3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Vulnerability Assessment Framework: Socio-Economic Survey on Refugees in Host Communities* (2024), <https://microdata.unhcr.org/index.php/catalog/1030>.
4. Shaddin Almasri, "How Humanitarian–Development Responses May Discriminate by Nationality: Refugee and Migrant Inclusion Following the 2016 Jordan Compact," *Development Policy Review* 42, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12734>; Katharina Lenner and Lewis Turner, "Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labor Market in Jordan," *Middle East Critique* 28, no. 1 (2019): 65–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2018.1462601>.
5. Allen Bartley and Paul Spoonley, "Intergenerational Transnationalism: 1.5 Generation Asian Migrants in New Zealand," *International Migration* 46, no. 4 (2008): 63–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2008.00472.x>; Holly Holloway-Friesen, "The Invisible Immigrants: Revealing 1.5 Generation Latino Immigrants and Their Bicultural Identities," *Higher Education in Review* 5 (2008): 37–66, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314401445_The_Invisible_Immigrants_Revealing_15_Generation_Latino_Immigrants_and_Their_Bicultural_Identities; and Sarah Benesch, "Generation 1.5 and Its Discourses of Partiality: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 7, nos. 3–4 (2008): 294–311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348450802237954>.
6. Key informant interview with a human rights specialist, April 2025.
7. In-depth interview with a 23-year-old woman participant, May 2025.
8. In-depth interview with a 25-year-old man participant, April 2025.
9. In-depth interview with a 19-year-old woman participant, May 2025.



RESTORING PROPERTY RIGHTS WITH A CLAIMS COMMISSION IN POST-CONFLICT SYRIA

Ahmet Gümüþbaþ

Fifteen years of conflict in Syria have produced mass displacement and widespread housing, land, and property (HLP) violations. More than 14 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced, and entire neighborhoods have been reduced to rubble. Property seizures, demolitions, and legally sanctioned confiscations were consistently used to punish opposition-aligned communities and reshape demographics. The political transition in December 2024 and the formation of an interim government have opened a rare window to address these legacies. Syrians and international actors are now looking beyond containment toward the conditions necessary for safe return. Most displaced Syrians still express a desire to return, but property now constitutes a primary determinant of their decision to do so.

The scale and complexity of Syria's property crisis make purely judicial remedies unrealistic. Records have been destroyed, claims overlap, authority is fragmented, and courts lack the capacity to manage the volume of cases. Without a specialized mechanism capable of resolving hundreds of thousands of potential claims, property will remain a structural barrier to return. This brief therefore proposes the creation of a property claims commission as a mass-claims body. Drawing on lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Iraq, the commission would operate outside ordinary courts, use simplified procedures and flexible evidentiary standards, and issue binding decisions — transforming property restitution and compensation from a source of renewed dispute into an enabler of durable return.

Property Challenges in Post-Conflict Syria

Return Aspirations

Since the change in regime, more than a million Syrians reportedly returned in the first year.¹ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) surveys indicate growing interest in return but rank property conditions as the leading barrier, ahead of security, livelihoods, and basic services.² Short visits to areas of origin often confirm these concerns. The Norwegian Refugee Council finds that nine in ten visitors encountered homes that were destroyed or uninhabitable, while International Rescue Committee surveys record a steady rise in respondents identifying property loss as the primary obstacle to return.³

Destruction, Systematic Property Violations, and Legalized Dispossession

The destruction of housing in Syria has been immense: At least 328,000 dwellings have been fully destroyed and up to a million more have been damaged or rendered uninhabitable, depriving roughly one in four Syrian families of their homes or preventing access to them.⁴ The scale of loss is

compounded by the prewar urban landscape, where 30% to 40% of housing was informal and concentrated in areas that later became frontlines.⁵ As a result, millions of residents lacked formal title deeds or relied on locally issued customary documents, making verification of ownership and post-conflict restitution far more complex.

Property loss in Syria has resulted from deliberate persecution and demographic reengineering. The Bashar al-Assad regime, along with allied actors, used laws and decrees to facilitate large-scale dispossession. Legislative Decree 66 (2012) and Law 10 (2018) allowed authorities to confiscate properties in redevelopment zones when owners did not appear in person, a requirement that was often impossible for displaced residents to fulfill. Counterterrorism Law 19 (2012), Decree 40 (2012) on demolitions, and Law 26 (2023) on the investment of confiscated assets further enabled seizures without due process, turning the legal framework itself into an instrument of permanent dispossession.⁶

Fragmented Authority and Conflicting Records

The war fractured Syria's governance landscape into competing property systems maintained by the Assad government, opposition councils, the Kurdish self-administration, and Islamist factions. Registry infrastructure was destroyed, damaged, or looted, while de facto authorities issued unofficial records.⁷ Combined with a broader documentation crisis, about 70% of refugees lack at least one key civil document, and many internally displaced persons (IDPs) have lost IDs or deeds. This makes it extremely difficult to meet prewar legal requirements for original titles or court judgments.⁸ Documentation loss has become a structural barrier to restitution.

Limits of Conventional Remedies

Post-conflict Syria cannot rely on ordinary courts or routine administrative applications to resolve property claims. The volume of anticipated claims,

which potentially rests in the millions, would overwhelm existing institutions, particularly given complex patterns of violation and overlapping rights. The widespread loss of documents and destruction of registries means that applying conventional evidentiary standards would exclude many rightful owners. Local courts also vary significantly in terms of capacity, independence, and geographic reach, and their ability to enforce decisions against powerful actors is uncertain. Recognizing these constraints, Syria's 2025 Constitutional Declaration explicitly calls for special mechanisms to address wartime confiscations. A Mass Claims Commission (MCC) is therefore a promising model for handling large-scale, complex property restitution in a transitional setting.

Lessons from Bosnia and Iraq

Why a Mass Claims Commission Works

In post-conflict settings marked by widespread human rights violations and mass displacement, ordinary courts are rarely capable of processing the scale and complexity of emerging property claims. MCCs address this gap by offering a specialized, quasi-judicial structure designed to efficiently handle a high volume of cases.⁹ They replace lengthy, case-by-case litigation with simplified filing procedures, flexible evidentiary standards adapted to documentation loss, and standardized remedies. The U.N. Pinheiro Principles (2005) similarly call for accessible, timely, and effective national mechanisms for property restitution and compensation wherever possible.¹⁰ MCCs operationalize these standards by providing a dedicated, claimant-friendly forum insulated from the bottlenecks and inequities of ordinary judicial pathways.

Bosnia: Commission for Real Property Claims

To implement Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia established the Commission for Real Property Claims of Displaced Persons and Refugees (CRPC) as an independent, internationally led body to adjudicate property claims and order restitution or compensation.¹¹ Relying on prewar cadastral records, invalidating coerced wartime transfers, and prioritizing in-kind restitution, it processed roughly 240,000 claims. By 2005, more than 90% of claimed properties had been repossessed by prewar owners. However, the CRPC could not compensate for destroyed or irretrievable properties, leaving many claimants without full redress, and early implementation faced local resistance until sustained international pressure and supplementary legislation strengthened enforcement.¹²

Iraq: Property Claims Commission and Compensation Committees

Iraq's property restitution efforts unfolded across two layers of injustice: confiscations under the Ba'ath regime that disproportionately affected Kurdish and Shi'a communities, and destruction generated by post-2003 conflict, including the insurgency of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). When the Coalition Provisional Authority established the Property Claims Commission (PCC) in 2004, policymakers looked to Bosnia's CRPC as a blueprint. Iraq adopted some elements of Bosnia's model, but the PCC was created rapidly, with limited consultation from Iraqi stakeholders, resulting in flawed legal frameworks, insufficient staffing, and procedural confusion.¹³

By the late 2010s, the PCC had processed more than 150,000 claims, many resolved by compensation where restitution was infeasible.¹⁴ Yet, unlike the CRPC's strong central authority and enforceability, Iraq's commission remained politically exposed and dependent on cooperation across institutions. Implementation of decisions was often delayed by local resistance, weak administrative capacity, and claimants' reluctance to return to insecure areas.

In parallel, Iraq's Law 20 (2009) established the Central Compensation Committees (CCC) to provide reparations for property damage, death, and injury resulting from terrorism or military operations after 2003. The committees processed a high volume of claims, particularly after the destruction inflicted during the ISIS conflict, and the compensation they issued enabled many families to begin rebuilding damaged homes. Yet underfunding, budgetary delays, and stringent evidentiary requirements produced backlogs and excluded large numbers of potential beneficiaries.¹⁵

Linking Property and Return

In Bosnia, minority return was initially constrained by secondary occupation and local obstruction; by 1999, only a small fraction of restitution decisions had been implemented. The Property Law Implementation Plan (PLIP) transformed this picture, raising implementation rates above 90% and enabling large-scale repossession and minority return, even though many owners later sold restituted property.¹⁶ Implementation rates rose to 93% by June 2005, while minority returns increased from 54.6% to 86.5% of all returns over the same period.¹⁷ UNHCR estimates that roughly half of the approximately 2.2 million refugees and displaced persons ultimately returned.

In Iraq, displaced people consistently rank housing among their top three requirements for return. Studies conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) show that widespread housing damage, insecurity, and limited access to compensation sharply reduce the ability to return.¹⁸ However, awareness of compensation committees and applications increased as procedures became better known.¹⁹

Bosnia and Iraq together underscore that the design and performance of property restitution institutions directly shape patterns of return. In Bosnia, the combination of a specialized commission with strong enforcement,

standardized procedures, and sustained international leverage translated formal rights into actual repossession, enabling the return of minorities, though in limited numbers. By contrast, the case of Iraq's fragmented mandates, weak enforcement, and chronic underfunding meant that many decisions remained symbolic and could not be converted into safe return. In both cases, displaced people treated secure access to HLP as a decisive precondition for planning their futures.

Designing a Syrian Property Claims Commission

Building on lessons from Bosnia and Iraq, a Syrian Property Claims Commission (SPCC) should be designed to efficiently process high volumes of HLP claims while ensuring fairness, accessibility, and legitimacy. It should also fit Syria's transitional political and legal environment, balancing the restoration of rights with pragmatic constraints such as limited resources, institutional capacity, and political fragility.

Mandate and Legal Framework

The SPCC should be embedded in transitional legislation and supported by clear implementing statutes with supremacy over conflicting regulations. This constitutional anchoring would grant the SPCC binding authority, shield it from political interference, and oblige all levels of government to comply with its decisions.

The mandate should define eligible claimants – for example, any Syrian displaced or dispossessed since 2011 – and the types of property covered, including homes, agricultural land, and commercial premises lost due to conflict-related causes. It should also empower the SPCC to invalidate wartime transfers made under coercive, discriminatory, or procedurally abusive laws and regulations.

The SPCC will need to address multiple claim categories, including:

- Confiscation claims: Properties seized under laws such as Law 10 (2018).
- Destroyed property claims: Homes rendered uninhabitable.
- Secondary occupation claims: Properties occupied without legal rights.
- Lost documentation claims: Cases relying on reconstructed proof of ownership.
- Tenancy and use-right claims: Long-term leases or agricultural use rights.

Institutional Structure and Independence

The SPCC should operate independently, neither as part of the ordinary judiciary nor under direct executive control. A central commission should be complemented by regional offices and mobile units inside Syria and in major refugee-hosting countries to maximize access. Partnerships with UNHCR, non-governmental organizations, and diaspora networks can support outreach and claimant assistance.

SPCC decisions should have a direct impact on land registry records. Law enforcement should be legally obliged to enforce eviction and handover orders, with due-process safeguards and relocation assistance for secondary occupants to avoid humanitarian harm. Institutional capacity should also be developed before full-scale rollout, including trained staff, clear internal rules, standardized forms, and case-management systems capable of handling large caseloads without sacrificing consistency.

Procedures and Evidence

Procedures should be simple, standardized, and claimant-centered. A form-based application system, available both online and in person, would allow claimants to submit property details, circumstances of loss, and any available

evidence. The SPCC should accept flexible forms of proof, such as expired deeds, utility bills, photographs, video, witness testimony, and community attestations, aligning with the Pinheiro Principles and reflecting the reality of destroyed or inaccessible records. A centralized digital HLP database should record all claims, enabling cross-checking, detection of duplicates, and transparent tracking of decisions and implementation. Digitizing prewar land records and relevant administrative archives should begin as early as possible, supported by technical partners with robust chain-of-custody and data-protection safeguards.

Delivering Restitution and Compensation

Syria would need to strike a pragmatic balance between restitution and compensation, recognizing severe fiscal and administrative constraints while avoiding coercive cash-for-property outcomes that pressure claimants to relinquish rights. Restitution should be the default remedy, with compensation reserved for cases where return to a specific property is impossible or clearly unsafe. A menu of options could include:

- Monetary compensation: Realistic, tiered payments funded by a mix of domestic and international resources.
- In-kind compensation: Alternative housing or land allocations.
- Development credits or vouchers: Redeemable in future housing projects.
- Restitution plus reconstruction assistance: For properties that have been destroyed but remain reclaimable.

Governance and Structural Limits

A dedicated property claims commission would nonetheless face critical structural limits. Property restitution is a necessary but insufficient condition for sustainable return. Many refugees and IDPs regard safety, basic services, and livelihoods as equally important determinants of return; ongoing localized

violence, explosive remnants of war, and the destruction of hospitals, schools, water, and electricity networks continue to deter large-scale repatriation efforts despite the political transition.²⁰ Without a parallel strategy to restore security, infrastructure, and economic opportunity, even an effective SPCC risks enabling only precarious, unequal returns rather than durable reintegration.

Governance deficits and renewed violence also constrain the transformative potential of any restitution mechanism in Syria. Although the transitional authorities present the current moment as a step toward inclusive governance, Syrians are still confronted with localized clashes, sectarian attacks, and insecurity, all of which undermine confidence in state institutions and shape return decisions.

At the legal and administrative level, the core framework of Assad-era property seizures and counterterrorism confiscations remains largely intact. Security clearance continues to function as an opaque prerequisite for property transactions, and recent decrees have lifted only a narrow subset of seizures in a selective and politicized manner.²¹ Parallel analyses document new HLP violations by actors linked to current authorities, cadastral freezes, ad hoc restitution committees, and informal practices that favor well-connected groups and reproduce exclusion.²² In this context, even a formally robust SPCC would operate within a partial rule-of-law environment, where noninclusive governance, episodic ethno-sectarian violence, and ongoing abuses could turn restitution into selective enforcement.

Policy Recommendations

Mass claims processes are indispensable after large-scale displacement, but their impact depends entirely on design, resourcing, and enforcement. If they are fragmented, underfunded, or overly judicialized, they generate paper rights rather than real remedies. If they combine clear mandates, simple

procedures, and credible implementation, they can turn property from a driver of conflict into a platform for return and recovery.

Syria's proposed SPCC should draw on these lessons to build a mechanism tailored to its own post-conflict landscape, capable of processing claims at scale while remaining accessible, politically insulated, and integrated into a broader strategy for safe and sustainable return.

1. **A well-structured SPCC is essential.** An SPCC will succeed only if it combines strong legal authority with institutional independence, operational capacity, and well-designed procedures. This requires constitutional and legislative backing, direct effect on administrative bodies, flexible evidentiary standards adapted to documentation loss, and simple, standardized procedures that are accessible from inside Syria and from exile. It also demands predictable funding and strong information systems so that decisions can be taken at scale, monitored transparently, and enforced against powerful actors. Without this institutional backbone, even sophisticated policy design will remain aspirational.
2. **Property restitution should be embedded in broader return and transitional justice strategies.** An SPCC cannot substitute for security guarantees, economic recovery, or reform of abusive legal and administrative practices. Property remedies should be integrated into a broader framework that addresses ongoing HLP violations, revises discriminatory legislation, and links restitution and compensation to other pillars of transitional justice, including accountability, truth-seeking, and institutional reform. A whole-of-government approach, coordinated across administrative bodies, local authorities, and international partners, is necessary to ensure that SPCC outcomes are consistent with urban planning, social protection, and state-building policies. Only under these conditions can property restitution move beyond symbolic recognition and contribute meaningfully to sustainable return.

Author

Ahmet Gümüþbaþ is a Ph.D. candidate in law at KU Leuven in Belgium. His research examines post-conflict property restitution and compensation mechanisms, with a focus on Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq. His work also explores broader questions of international law, transitional justice, and forced displacement.

Notes

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "UNHCR Syria Operational Update – September 2025," October 23, 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/119304>.
2. UNHCR, *Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria* (2025), https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/UNHCR_Flash_Intention_Survey2025.pdf.
3. Norwegian Refugee Council, "Syria: Destruction, Lack of Services Delay Safe Returns Within Country," press release, February 13, 2025, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2025/february/syria-destruction-lack-of-services-delay-safe-returns-within-country>; International Rescue Committee (IRC), "Syrians on the Move: Refugee Returns Intentions," September 2025, <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Syrians%20on%20the%20Move%20-%20Refugee%20Returns%20Intentions%20Policy%20Briefing%20-%20September%202025.pdf>.
4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *The Impact of the Conflict in Syria: Socioeconomic Impact Assessment* (2025), https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp-sy-seia-final-24022025_compressed.pdf.
5. Ahmad Sukkar et al., *Informal Settlements in Syria: What Approach after the Conflict?* (Arab Reform Initiative, 2021), <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/informal-settlements-in-syria-what-approach-after-the-conflict/>.
6. Ayman Abu-Hashem, *The Role of Transitional Justice (Legal and Institutional Reform) in Addressing Property and Housing Issues in Syria (The Day After, 2023)*, <https://tda-sy.org/2023/04/17/58554/>.
7. Aron Lund, "No Papers, No Rights: Understanding Syria's Civil Documentation Crisis," *The New Humanitarian*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/07/30/syria-civil-documentation-crisis-rights>.

Notes (cont'd)

8. Samer Aburass, "Syrian Refugees' Documentation Crisis," *Norwegian Refugee Council*, January 26, 2017, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2017/january/syrian-refugees-documentation-crisis>.
9. Hans Van Houtte et al., *Post-War Restoration of Property Rights Under International Law: Procedural Aspects* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).
10. United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, *Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons* (Pinheiro Principles), E/CN.4/Sub.2/2005/17 (United Nations, 2005), <https://www.unhcr.org/media/principles-housing-and-property-restitution-refugees-and-displaced-persons-pinheiro-0>.
11. Commission for Real Property Claims of Displaced Persons and Refugees (CRPC), *Annexes – End of Mandate Report* (1996–2003) (2003).
12. Rhodri C. Williams, "Post-Conflict Property Restitution and Refugee Return in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Implications for International Standard-Setting and Practice," *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 37, no. 3 (2005): 441–531.
13. The Iraqi Property Claims Commission (IPCC) was created in 2004 by the Coalition Provisional Authority; it was reconstituted as the Commission for the Resolution of Real Property Disputes (CRRPD) in 2006 and renamed the Property Claims Commission (PCC) in 2010. Ahmet Gümüşbaş, "Transitional Justice Perspective on Property Reparations in Iraq," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 23, no. 3 (2023): 389–406, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12400>.
14. PCC, Annual Report 2021 (2021), <https://web.archive.org/web/20250717133613/https://pcc.iq/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D9%8A-2021.pdf>.
15. Clara Sandoval and Miriam Puttick, *Reparations for the Victims of Conflict in Iraq: Lessons Learned from Comparative Practice* (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International, 2017), <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/mrgi/2017/en/119323>.
16. Antoine Buyse, "Home Sweet Home? Restitution in Post-Conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 27, no. 1 (2009): 9–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016934410902700102>.
17. Charles B. Philpott, "From the Right to Return to the Return of Rights: Completing Post-War Property Restitution in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 18, no. 1 (2006): 30–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eei046>.

Notes (cont'd)

18. International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Access to Durable Solutions Among IDPs in Iraq: Experiences Applying to Compensation* (2019), https://arablandinitiative.gltm.net/sites/default/files/2024-04/docs/iom_propertyclaims_2019.pdf.
19. IOM, *Access to Durable Solutions Among IDPs in Iraq: Five Years in Displacement* (2020), <https://iraq.iom.int/resources/access-durable-solutions-among-idps-iraq-five-years-displacement>.
20. IRC, *Syrians on the Move: Regional Refugee Intentions Briefing*, July 23, 2025, <https://www.rescue.org/report/syrians-move-regional-refugee-intentions-briefing>.



CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION, AND VULNERABILITY DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Gerasimos Tsourapas and Imad El-Anis

By 2050, climate change could displace more than 216 million people within their own countries.¹ The Middle East is among the world's most exposed regions: Rising temperatures, declining water availability, and disruptions to food systems are already straining infrastructure, public services, and livelihoods. These environmental pressures are unfolding alongside persistent political and economic volatility, creating a multilayered governance challenge.

Across the region, states are not only trying to absorb these pressures but also responding diplomatically. Governments increasingly frame environmental vulnerability and displacement as issues of international responsibility and

geopolitical significance. In doing so, they aim to attract development finance, strengthen strategic partnerships, and elevate their diplomatic standing.

This brief refers to this practice as vulnerability diplomacy. The term describes how states use crisis narratives, as related to climate, displacement, or both, to secure external support. These narratives are often designed to resonate with donor priorities, demonstrate institutional capacity, and emphasize national relevance. The emergence of this strategy reflects a wider structural context: responses to climate change and forced migration remain fragmented, donor-led, and shaped by political interests rather than integrated planning.

Egypt and Jordan offer particularly instructive cases. Both countries are contending with environmental stress and displacement, while maintaining longstanding relationships with key international donors. Over time, they have developed approaches to reframing vulnerability as a form of diplomatic capital. This raises an important question: What are the consequences of leveraging crisis in a fragmented global order?

Drawing on the experiences of Egypt and Jordan, this brief examines how vulnerability diplomacy operates in practice. It considers the political and institutional dynamics that enable it and assesses its implications for the governance of climate adaptation and forced displacement. Understanding this emerging pattern is essential for analyzing the evolving relationship between crisis, aid, and statecraft in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Vulnerability Becomes Leverage

Understanding Vulnerability Diplomacy

Understanding how Egypt and Jordan experience and respond to crises requires a closer look at the structure of their vulnerability. Vulnerability

diplomacy is used as an umbrella term for how states convert structural fragility into external support, with migration diplomacy and more acute forms of crisis diplomacy operating as subsets within this wider repertoire. As Smit and Wandel note, the relevant literature has long held that “the vulnerability of any system ... is reflective of (or a function of) the exposure and sensitivity of that system to hazardous conditions and the ability or capacity or resilience of the system to cope, adapt or recover from the effects of those conditions.”² Both the Egyptian and Jordanian experiences of hosting large refugee populations and facing the adverse effects of climate change demonstrate high levels of political, economic, and social exposure and sensitivity. These are assuredly not new pressures, but they are becoming more acute.

Threat Multipliers and Structural Inequalities

Compounding this condition are the low levels of adaptability and resilience found in both countries, especially in the economic and social sectors. Importantly, while exposures, sensitivities, and adaptive capacities are experienced at the individual and local levels, they represent larger-scale determinants that are manifested at the national level.³ In this sense, localized risk is embedded within broader systems of national governance and capacity. The MENA region as a whole is particularly vulnerable to both displacement- and climate-linked challenges, in particular with regard to the access of scarce resources, the distribution of common goods, and engagement in policy-making processes.

It is increasingly evident that displacement and climate change are interacting with a range of social, economic, and political phenomena in Egypt and Jordan, acting as threat multipliers that increase the vulnerability of the states and their populations. In both cases, the causal factors of displacement and climate change challenges lie elsewhere, often with larger and more powerful actors involved; for example, the majority of historical greenhouse gas

emissions have come from the most advanced industrial powers. Despite this, states like Egypt and Jordan are expected to manage the consequences, often with limited support.

As is the case with other less developed states (i.e., states that have not benefitted from the phenomena that have caused these problems: for example, rapid economic growth and resource capture), Egypt and Jordan's populations have and will continue to bear significant costs. Overall, intersecting vulnerabilities in these two states are shaped by their national political-economic systems and enduring social vulnerabilities. Here, Egypt and Jordan mirror the experiences of other developing states insofar as vulnerability is not merely a function of exposure to climate risks (e.g., declining precipitation and surface water flows) or forced displacement (e.g., pressure on housing and social services due to rapid population growth), but also of adaptive capacity, which is inequitably distributed domestically.⁴ This means that concerted efforts to respond to these challenges have been met with limited success. This structural inequality will continue to shape which communities receive protections and which remain at risk.

Egypt and Crisis Leverage

Water Insecurity and Climate Stress

Egypt faces overlapping environmental, demographic, and geopolitical pressures that have placed significant strain on national planning and governance. A central challenge is the country's increasing water insecurity. With 97% of its freshwater supply drawn from the Nile, Egypt remains highly vulnerable to climate-driven changes in precipitation and temperature, as well as to upstream developments such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Projections suggest a significant reduction in per capita water availability by 2050, with direct implications for agriculture, food systems, and public health.

Rising sea levels and saltwater intrusion along the Nile Delta further compound these risks, threatening key infrastructure and densely populated areas.

Migration Diplomacy and Regional Stability

Congruently, Egypt continues to act as a major host and transit country for displaced populations. As of 2025, over 940,000 refugees and asylum seekers were formally registered with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while Egyptian officials often refer to a broader figure of six to ten million guests.⁵ This flexible framing enables the state to position itself as a regional stabilizer while avoiding the legal obligations associated with formal refugee status. The arrival of displaced populations, particularly from Sudan and Syria, has increased demand for services such as healthcare, housing, and education, especially in urban and peri-urban areas already facing economic pressure. Officials increasingly frame refugee-related population pressure as an intensifying strain on already stressed water and energy systems.

These converging challenges have been folded into a broader state strategy of external engagement. Egypt has positioned itself as both exposed and indispensable, using the language of international responsibility and climate vulnerability to secure sustained donor attention. This approach reflects a form of eco-humanitarian rentierism, in which crisis conditions are narrated, curated, and leveraged to attract international resources.⁶ Egypt's Nexus of Water, Food, and Energy (NWFE) platform, launched during its COP27 presidency, is a prominent example. Designed to attract adaptation finance and climate investment, NWFE emphasizes bankable partnerships with international donors and visibility for green infrastructure projects.⁷

In migration diplomacy, Egypt has adopted a similar approach. The 2024 EU-Egypt Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership secured more than €7 billion

in funding, including €200 million specifically allocated for migration management.⁸ Official messaging frames Egypt as a humane actor committed to regional stability, while avoiding commitments to long-term refugee integration or legal reform. Most refugee services remain under the purview of U.N. agencies, with the state retaining discretion over legal status and mobility.

This strategy has delivered measurable gains in diplomatic recognition and external funding. Public officials routinely highlight the social and economic strains of hosting refugees. In January 2025, Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty warned: “I say this frankly: our capacity to accommodate and continue our efforts is at risk, especially given the insufficient international support relative to the pressures we are facing.”⁹ Such rhetoric is often invoked to signal both moral magnanimity and infrastructural strain.

However, it also carries significant risks. Climate adaptation efforts remain highly centralized and technocratic, with limited inclusion of local actors or civil society. Displaced populations continue to experience legal precarity and inconsistent access to services. Donor priorities, particularly in the EU context, remain focused on containment and enforcement, shaping the direction of aid and limiting Egypt’s policy autonomy.

Risks and Limitations

By transforming vulnerability into diplomatic leverage, Egypt has secured short-term benefits. Yet the underlying structures of dependency and exclusion remain intact. Without broader institutional reform and more equitable approaches to adaptation and displacement, Egypt’s model of crisis diplomacy risks reinforcing long-term fragility rather than building resilience.

Jordan and Strategic Narratives

Water Scarcity and Demographic Pressure

Jordan faces multiple phenomena that overlap to form a nexus of long-term challenges in the environmental, economic, social, and political spheres. Chief among these problems is its acute freshwater scarcity.¹⁰ The kingdom has a meager 65 cubic meters of renewable freshwater per person per year, making it the world's fourth most freshwater-scarce country. This scarcity is all but guaranteed to worsen due to the effects of climate change and rapid population growth. Water insecurity has become not merely an environmental issue but a national development concern.

Current estimates predict Jordan will see an 18% reduction in surface runoff at the same time as demand increases from its current 1,167 million cubic meters to 2,094 million cubic meters by 2050.¹¹ Coupled with an increase in average annual temperatures — predicted to rise by up to 1.8 degrees Celsius by 2100 — and droughts, Jordan is expected to suffer significant losses in arable land, an important decline in agricultural output, and much higher levels of climate-related illnesses.

At the same time, Jordan hosts a large number of refugees displaced from conflicts in neighboring countries, especially from Syria since 2011.¹² There are over 615,000 refugees registered with the UNHCR, with possibly an estimated 800,000 additional refugees living in camps and host communities around the kingdom.¹³ King Abdullah II has claimed that “refugees make up over one third of our 11-million population.”¹⁴ This demographic shift has shaped urbanization patterns and placed significant pressure on public services, labor markets, and social cohesion. Government messaging often links rapid refugee-driven population growth to worsening water scarcity and rising adaptation costs.

Importantly, the influx and long-term settlement of such a large number of refugees has reinforced the rapid population growth experienced by Jordan over the past decade — leading to the increasing cost of water, housing, healthcare, education, transportation, energy, and other living costs, but has also meant an increase in the proportion of the Jordanian population that are intensely vulnerable to climate change.

Crisis Diplomacy and External Support

While these intersecting humanitarian and environmental challenges have proven extremely difficult to overcome, they have also presented the Jordanian government with some opportunities, and have been integrated into broader national policy-making structures and patterns. This is an illustration of eco-humanitarian rentierism.¹⁵ Here, Jordan mobilizes a form of crisis diplomacy aimed at securing external support that relies on the development of strategic narratives, which emphasize its vulnerabilities and its importance to international actors.

Throughout its history, the kingdom has been dependent on international aid and has mastered the politics of multi-domain crisis diplomacy. This legacy has provided the state with deep institutional experience in framing domestic challenges in ways that align with global donor agendas. In recent years, the government has expanded this strategy to align traditional security threats with environmental degradation and forced displacement, stressing climate change as a central narrative device that portrays Jordan as facing existential threats.

Jordanian strategies go beyond simply scare-mongering, however, and include emphasizing its proactive stance and readiness to confront climate change and displacement. This has been moderately successful, with Jordan securing over \$4.5 billion in climate-related aid since 2008 and up to \$10

billion in refugee-related aid since the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011.¹⁶ These flows have helped sustain public services, stabilize budget shortfalls, and support donor-driven projects in areas such as education, health, and water infrastructure.

Dependency and Rentier Logic

This practice comes with significant negative ramifications. Asymmetries between Jordan and donor states, for example, shape policy-making and implementation in the kingdom. There is a risk that converting climate vulnerability and displacement into capital may undermine genuine local empowerment, institutional reform, and long-term resilience and development in Jordan. Donors pursue their own objectives when providing aid to Jordan, and these goals often do not align fully with Jordanian interests: It is the donors that have the power and position to inform the terms of aid.

This arguably creates a dependency dynamic in which Jordanian agency remains constrained by external priorities, even as the state demonstrates diplomatic adaptability. Thus, Jordan's dependency on external sources of support risks reinforcing a rentier logic that is unsustainable and undermines effective governance, especially as global crises and austerity reshape aid markets. The challenge ahead lies in breaking the following cycle: crisis secures support, but support rarely shifts the underlying structures of vulnerability.

Both Egypt and Jordan leverage intertwined environmental and displacement pressures to sustain international attention, but through different institutional pathways. Each secures short-term gains, yet underlying fragilities persist, illustrating how vulnerability diplomacy delivers visibility and resources without necessarily advancing long-term resilience.

Policy Recommendations

These dynamics highlight the need for strategic, forward-looking approaches. The following policy recommendations aim to strengthen long-term resilience while addressing immediate environmental and displacement pressures. They are intended for multiple stakeholders, including public-sector policymakers in Jordan and Egypt, existing and prospective donor states, and non-state actors, particularly international non-governmental organizations (INGOs).

1. **Align funding with long-term resilience goals**, rather than short-term containment or donor visibility, to counter the incentives created by vulnerability diplomacy.
2. **Integrate climate and displacement programming** that reflects the interconnected nature of crisis dynamics and reduces fragmentation across sectors and mandates.
3. **Support locally-led adaptation efforts** to ensure that planning includes municipal authorities, civil society, and displaced communities rather than just centralized agencies.
4. **Encourage transparency in state-donor negotiations**, including public disclosure of aid terms and recipient commitments, especially in areas shaped by migration diplomacy and security cooperation.
5. **Recognize the strategic logic of eco-humanitarian rentierism**, and pair recognition with clear accountability mechanisms to ensure that aid supports institutional reform, not just crisis performance.
6. **Promote regional coordination across MENA** to address cross-border challenges in climate, water, and mobility governance, and reduce the duplication or politicization of aid flows.

Authors

Gerasimos Tsourapas, Ph.D., FAcSS, is the 125th Anniversary Chair and professor of international relations at the University of Birmingham and an honorary research fellow at the University of Glasgow, where he previously served as professor of international relations. He is editor-in-chief of *Migration Studies* (Oxford University Press) and has held visiting appointments at the London School of Economics and Political Science, The American University in Cairo, Harvard University, and Koç University. He is also a senior fellow at the Henry J. Leir Institute for Migration and Human Security, Tufts University, and a nonresident research fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). He holds degrees from Yale University, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and SOAS, University of London.

Imad El-Anis, Ph.D., is an associate professor of international relations and director of the Centre for Policy, Citizenship, and Society at Nottingham Trent University in the United Kingdom. His research focuses on the political economy of Middle Eastern states, including climate change-related experiences and policies and emerging security challenges.

Notes

1. World Bank, *Groundswell Part II: Acting on Internal Climate Migration* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1596/36248>.
2. Barry Smit and Johanna Wandel, "Adaptation, Adaptive Capacity and Vulnerability," *Global Environmental Change* 16, no. 3 (2006): 282–92, 286, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2006.03.008>.
3. Smit and Wandel, 289.
4. Federica Cappelli, "Investigating the Origins of Differentiated Vulnerabilities to Climate Change through the Lenses of the Capability Approach," *Economia Politica* 40, no. 3 (2023): 1051–74, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40888-023-00300-3>.
5. Amr Adīb, "Remarks on *al-Ḥikāyah* [The Story]," MBC Masr, posted May 16, 2025, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pp22JrABi8E>. Translation from Arabic.
6. Gerasimos Tsourapas and Imad El-Anis, "Instrumentalising Crisis as Capital: Eco-Humanitarian Rentierism and the Global Politics of Aid," *International Affairs* 101, no. 6 (2025): 2149–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf185>. On how states manipulate or selectively present refugee data to enhance visibility and diplomatic leverage, see Tsourapas, "Credible Fictions: How States Stage Refugee Governance for Geopolitical Gain," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 39, no. 1 (2025): 22–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaf068>.
7. Tim Schauenberg, "COP27 Host Egypt Criticized for Climate Targets, Repression," Deutsche Welle, November 6, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/cop27-host-egypt-criticized-for-climate-targets-repression/a-63872211>.
8. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, "Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership Between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the European Union," European Commission, March 17, 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/joint-declaration-strategic-and-comprehensive-partnership-between-arab-republic-egypt-and-european-2024-03-17_en.
9. "Egypt Rejects the 'Uprooting of Peoples' from Their Lands," Middle East Monitor, January 29, 2025, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250101-egypt-rejects-uprooting-of-peoples/>.
10. Hussam Hussein, "Yarmouk, Jordan, and Disi Basins: Examining the Impact of the Discourse of Water Scarcity in Jordan on Transboundary Water Governance," *Mediterranean Politics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 269–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2017.1418941>.
11. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, *Fourth National Communication on Climate Change* (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022), <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Hashemite%20Kingdom%20of%20Jordan%204th%20National%20Communication.pdf>.

Notes (cont'd)

12. Reva Dhingra, "Coordination in Practice or Performance? The Political Economy of Refugee Aid Coordination in Jordan," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35, no. 4 (2022): 1472–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feac002>.
13. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Jordan: Operational Data Portal," UNHCR Operational Data Portal, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/jor>.
14. King Abdullah II, address to the Plenary Session of the 78th General Assembly of the United Nations, New York, September 19, 2023, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/speeches/plenary-session-the78th-general-assembly-united-nations>.
15. Tsourapas and El-Anis, "Instrumentalising Crisis as Capital."
16. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Climate-Related Development Finance: Recipient Country Data* (2021); OECD, "Finance for Sustainable Development: Development Finance Data," OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/>; UNHCR, "Jordan: Operational Data Portal."



HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN GAZA AMID PROLONGED CONFLICT

Rabeh Morrar

The humanitarian situation in Gaza has been shaped by a unique combination of historical, political, and geographic factors, making it a long-term and structurally complicated crisis. Humanitarian programs over the years have shifted from short-term emergency responses toward long-term operational arrangements, in which international actors have played quasi-state roles in the absence of well-established domestic institutions.¹

Recent studies highlight a key contradiction: Rather than helping to bring about the end of the blockade, humanitarian assistance has coevolved alongside it, becoming part of its logic with the systems of control that restrict its efficiency.² This brings us to one of the key questions of humanitarian

policy in Gaza; does aid help address the root causes of the crisis, or does it only help alleviate symptoms when the underlying political reality remains unchanged?

The humanitarian conditions in Gaza were made substantially worse following the eruption of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023. The Palestinian Ministry of Health reported that as of August 18, 2025, over 62,000 people had been killed and over 156,000 had been injured.³ Famine has also begun taking hold as the crisis has continued, with 263 recorded deaths caused by starvation, 112 of whom were children. This catastrophic situation has caused the U.N. and other experts to forecast a man-made famine and an unprecedented worldwide health crisis.⁴

Gaza is unlike any other place for humanitarian work. While war and destruction occur elsewhere, the lingering and complicated nature of the crisis in Gaza makes humanitarian policies extremely complicated. In contrast to conditions in disaster zones, where the area passes through a state of emergency and slowly builds back over time, Gaza is in a continuous, everlasting state of emergency.⁵ This nature of perpetual crisis has compelled humanitarian organizations to use alternative methods, which include the provision of short-term life-saving support coupled with long-term development strategies.

The purpose of this policy brief is to evaluate the effectiveness of humanitarian aid policies in Gaza over the past 15 years in order to understand what has worked, what has not, and the reasoning behind these outcomes. It assesses the political and operational impediments that prevent the full benefit of humanitarian initiatives and suggests how the role of international coordination, field-level approaches, and local involvement might be augmented to boost the effectiveness of aid.

Ultimately, it underscores the critical nexus of politics and humanitarian action, the significance of local communities, and the importance of principled and context-sensitive practices in conflict-related settings where humanitarian actors have to balance effectiveness and ethical values.

The Impact of the Blockade

Economic De-Development and Dependency

The blockade on Gaza since 2006 has constrained the economy, turning a once-productive society into one highly dependent on foreign assistance. Such a de-development policy has not improved Israeli security either.⁶ Rather, it has produced a cohort of young people with limited opportunities who may be susceptible to recruitment by militant groups.⁷

While humanitarian efforts in Gaza have helped sustain life, they have not reversed long-term de-development. The humanitarian landscape from 2010 to 2025 reveals a set of deeply interconnected challenges, including access restrictions imposed by Israel, stabilizing efforts by U.N. agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the risks faced by humanitarian workers on the ground. These challenges should be carefully analyzed and understood to support lasting peace and provide relief to residents.

Access Restrictions and Humanitarian Constraints

Israel uses a dual-use list to limit basic goods and commodities from entering Gaza, on the basis that they could have military applications, even when they are civilian items.⁸ This complex and restrictive list harms the civilian population while doing little to prevent military build-up. Banning the importation of vital reconstruction supplies, such as cement, water pipes, or medical equipment, not only stops humanitarian projects but also slows the

reconstruction of essential infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and roads. The resulting gaps in infrastructure can lead to public health risks, including waterborne diseases.

Moreover, important items critical for everyday use are restricted from entering Gaza, and the existing system for inspecting humanitarian goods is slow, unpredictable, and opaque. These processes create logistical bottlenecks, elevate the cost of delivering aid, and hinder timely responses to emergency needs.

The Structure of Aid Delivery

Humanitarian Coordination Architecture

The humanitarian response in Gaza is coordinated through a structured cluster system led by the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) under the authority of the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator, bringing together U.N. agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local actors through sectoral clusters and an Inter-Cluster Coordination Group to ensure coherent planning, implementation, and advocacy.⁹ This cluster system has been crucial in decreasing duplication of efforts and enhancing the activities of the overall response. However, the efficiency of such coordination is often constrained by the extreme limitations of movement and the exclusion of some local actors in the fora of strategic decision-making.

International and Local Actors in Aid Delivery

U.N. agencies and INGOs play a vital role in Gaza's humanitarian landscape. They are critical in terms of governing and stabilizing the scenario in Gaza, thereby ensuring the social order does not completely deteriorate.

Constraining their operations, targeting their infrastructure, or delegitimizing their role does not serve Israel's interests; rather, it undermines an essential civilian humanitarian buffer and risks creating operational and governance gaps that weaken coordinated aid delivery and civilian protection frameworks.¹⁰ While local NGOs are the most efficient first line responders, they are sidelined in the funding chain. International aid is directed through the U.N. and INGOs in the vast majority of cases and local organizations are mostly left in a sub-implementer role.

Innovation, Cash Assistance, and UNRWA's Role

In order to overcome some of the challenges surrounding humanitarian aid in Gaza, the World Food Program (WFP) has paved the way for innovative forms of aid, most prominently in the massive use of Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA). WFP and other actors in Gaza have reported that, in addition to improving efficiency by 25%–30%, CVA gives recipients greater agency and dignity while supporting local markets, even in a blockaded economy. It proves that even in a highly constrained setting, market-based strategies are promising and should be the default modality whenever possible. In addition, the WFP's cutting-edge forms of aid allow them to continue to provide aid even when physical access is restricted – mainly through technological and digital means.¹¹ Nevertheless, these innovations are ad hoc in nature and are not yet mainstream elements of U.N. operations.

Additionally, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is not merely another aid agency. Its extensive infrastructure, strong community connections, and commitment to providing basic services such as education and health care make it a keystone of Gaza's social infrastructure.¹² Attacks on its facilities and political pressure to end its operations pose an immediate threat to the stability of the humanitarian response, a risk that is particularly acute for its workforce.

Although every humanitarian worker in Gaza faces high levels of danger, local staff are the most affected by security threats. Like the communities they serve, they are highly exposed to the conflict and have limited access to security infrastructure, evacuation options, and hardship allowances typically available to their international counterparts.¹³ The personal and professional risks they face are extreme, yet poorly recognized and inadequately addressed within the current aid architecture.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on three key areas and offer a strategic roadmap for stakeholders to strengthen principled and effective humanitarian action in both Gaza and similarly protracted humanitarian and displacement crises. These proposals move beyond operational fixes, addressing the deeper structural and political drivers that continue to undermine aid effectiveness and long-term stability.

Make Governance Inclusive to Support Reconstruction

First, the reconstruction of Gaza should be part of a broader national plan that strengthens institutional, economic, and planning alignment between Gaza and the West Bank, ensuring long-term sustainability and inclusive recovery. Given the severe financial crisis facing the Palestinian government, compounded by ongoing fiscal restrictions and Israel's withholding of Palestinian clearance revenues, ministries and government offices should be adequately funded to spearhead damage assessments, urban planning, and reconstruction efforts.¹⁴

At the same time, transparency and accountability mechanisms should accompany any reconstruction financing. Strengthening accountability and restoring Palestinian fiscal sovereignty should be viewed as complementary objectives, not substitutes for one another. Furthermore, internationally endorsed and Palestinian-led oversight mechanisms should be established to ensure that aid is allocated based on national priorities and is held beyond political interference. A national reconstruction data platform should be established to provide real-time, publicly accessible information on funding flows, project implementation, and performance metrics.

Address Security Concerns While Ensuring Economic Development

To ensure that vital aid reaches Gaza, all border crossing points — including Rafah and Kerem Shalom — should remain open permanently, allowing humanitarian assistance, commercial goods, and fuel to pass through. Stable communication channels with Egypt are also essential to prevent unilateral closures. Key stakeholders, in coordination with the U.N., should fully reexamine the list of dual-use items to remove those essential for civilian infrastructure and humanitarian response, including certain medical equipment, water pumps, and construction materials.

Additionally, a clear, predictable, and streamlined green channel should be established for pre-approved humanitarian organizations, including the U.N. and large INGOs, import goods to vetted projects. Investments should also be made at crossing points to upgrade scanning technology, enhancing the speed and efficiency of inspections, while ensuring security concerns are addressed.

Policies to protect humanitarian operations should include reiterating obligations under international humanitarian law for the protection of civilians and aid workers. De-confliction measures with humanitarian agencies should

be strengthened to ensure assistance convoys and facilities are not caught in the crossfire of military operations. Any incident involving harm to humanitarian personnel or damage to facilities should be transparently investigated, with accountability and prosecution for those responsible.

Bridging the humanitarian-development gap will improve the overall humanitarian landscape in Gaza. This can include integrated programs that combine life-saving support with resilience building, livelihoods initiatives, and psychosocial services. Supporting programs that emphasize the provision of essential services as a foundation for long-term recovery allows partners to respond to the chronic nature of the crisis while preparing communities for sustainable development.

Economic measures can further strengthen long-term resilience. Restrictions on the export of goods to traditional markets in the West Bank should be lifted, and the movement of raw materials in Gaza's manufacturing and agricultural sectors should be liberalized. Reviving the export sector is the most sustainable way to reduce dependency and support a functioning civilian economy.

Improve the Humanitarian Infrastructure at All Levels

A strong alliance of local humanitarian NGOs in Gaza should be established to improve coordination, advocacy and representation. The coalition would communicate with donors, the U.N., and other stakeholders, presenting unified positions on major issues such as access, protection, and funding.

A system-wide approach should be implemented to provide multiyear funding for local Palestinian NGOs, rather than relying on a subcontracting model. Relationships with local Palestinian NGOs should be reframed from subcontracting toward a codesign and co-implementation, with an emphasis

on long-term, trust-based partnerships instead of short-term, project-based agreements. To support this shift, a collective strategy should also be developed to diversify funding sources. This requires broadening the range of financing mechanisms available to local actors and reducing dependence on traditional humanitarian funding streams.

Key stakeholders should familiarize themselves with emerging opportunities in private philanthropy, crowdfunding, and social enterprise to lessen reliance on traditional, and at times politically unstable, humanitarian donors. Additionally, donors should allow local partners to receive a higher proportion of direct funding. In contexts where this is not feasible, they should invest in transparent and equitable overhead-sharing arrangements.

To ensure innovative and efficient aid modalities, international organizations should adopt a cash-first policy, making CVA the default modality across humanitarian programming. A cash-first approach would require investing in market analyses and digital delivery systems so local markets can absorb higher demand without triggering price inflation and rationing, and so cash transfers can be delivered securely, transparently, and accountably. Remote management and third-party monitoring protocols should be developed and standardized to ensure the quality and accountability of CVA programs when physical access is limited.

Lastly, the well-being and security of humanitarian staff must be prioritized. Standards for staff care should be strengthened, including fair pay, insurance coverage, access to mental health services, and inclusion in donor budgets. A peer support network of staff and leadership should be established to provide a space to share experiences and coping strategies. Working within Gaza's complex humanitarian system is often highly stressful, and stronger support structures would help personnel manage sustained pressure and maintain operational effectiveness.¹⁵ Moreover, a centralized, real-time security information system should be developed to alert personnel to immediate risks and support safe coordination of movement.

Author

Rabeh Morrar, Ph.D., is an associate professor of development economics at An-Najah National University in Palestine. He earned his Ph.D. in development economics from Lille 1 University for Science and Technology in France in 2011. He previously served as head of the Economics Department and as a senior researcher at the Centre for International Development at Northumbria University in the United Kingdom, where he completed a postdoctoral fellowship. Since 2021, he has served as director of research at the Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS). His research focuses on development economics, political economy, innovation ecosystems, labor markets, international aid, and sustainable development in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Notes

1. Tamer Qarmout and Daniel Béland, “The Politics of International Aid to the Gaza Strip,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 4 (2012): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2012.XLI.4.32>.
2. Theresa Farhat et al., “Responding to the Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza: Damned if You Do ... Damned if You Don’t!,” *Annals of Global Health* 89, no. 1 (2023): 53, <https://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.3975>.
3. Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, “Martyrs Statistics in Gaza Strip and West Bank,” 2025, https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang_en/1405/default.aspx?lang=en.
4. Refugees International, *Siege and Starvation: How Israel Obstructs Aid to Gaza* (2024), <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/siege-and-starvation-how-israel-obstructs-aid-to-gaza/>.
5. Gil Loescher and James Milner, *Protracted Refugee Situations: Domestic and International Security Implications* (Routledge, 2005), <https://www.routledge.com/Protracted-Refugee-Situations-Domestic-and-International-Security-Implications/Loescher-Milner/p/book/9780415382984>.
6. Simone O’Broin, *Applying International Criminal Law to Israel’s Treatment of the Palestinian People*, BADIL’s Working Paper No. 12 (BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, 2011), https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/19/icl-wp12-eng-1618823024.pdf.

Notes (cont'd)

7. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "OPT: Blockade Frustrates Gaza Students," IRIN News, March 16, 2011, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-200507/>.
8. "Gaza Policy Forum Summary: Experts Agree that Israel's Dual-Use Policy Causes Acute Distress," Gisha, January 27, 2022, <https://gisha.org/en/gaza-policy-forum-summary-experts-agree-that-israels-dual-use-policy-causes-acute-distress/>.
9. OCHA, "Coordination Structure," accessed January 30, 2026, <https://www.ochaopt.org/coordination/coordination-structure>.
10. Nina Miholjčić Ivković, "The United Nations in Gaza: Balancing Humanitarian Aid and Geopolitical Pressures amid Internal Reform," *Srpski godišnjak za međunarodno pravo* (2025): 503–16.
11. Action Against Hunger (ACF), "Cash and Protection Assistance for Affected Households in the Gaza Strip" (Project ID: HPSE22-FSC;PRO-183710-1, 2022), <https://projects.hpc.tools/project/183710/view>.
12. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNRWA), "United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East," ReliefWeb, <https://reliefweb.int/organization/unrwa>.
13. "Attacks and Access Barriers Are Imperiling the Lives of People in Need of Assistance," Humanitarian Action, December 4, 2024, <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2025/article/attacks-and-access-barriers-are-imperiling-lives-people-need-assistance>.
14. Naser Abdelkarim, "The Palestinian Authority's Dire Financial Straits: Decades of Israeli Occupation and Restrictions on the Palestinian Economy Make Sovereignty Practically Impossible," Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, June 15, 2025, <https://www.rosalux.ps/the-palestinian-authoritys-dire-financial-straits-decades-of-israeli-occupation-and-restrictions-on-the-palestinian-economy-make-sovereignty-practically-impossible-8453/>.
15. Muna Abed Alah, "Echoes of Conflict: The Enduring Mental Health Struggle of Gaza's Healthcare Workers," *Conflict and Health* 18, no. 1 (2024): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-024-00577-6>.



bakerinstitute.org/mena