



OCTOBER 2026

THE SELF-RELIANCE DIVIDEND

The Imperative of Syrian Refugees' Economic Inclusion

AUTHOR
Will Todman

A Report of the
CSIS Middle East Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The politics surrounding displaced Syrians in the Middle East has transformed in recent years. For more than a decade after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, policy-makers struggled to transition from a humanitarian response to a longer-term strategy for dealing with Syrian refugees. Despite efforts to develop “durable solutions,” donors, host governments, and humanitarian actors largely converged around an expensive emergency management model that sustained refugees and kept them within the region without giving them meaningful pathways to autonomy. As a result, in 2026—nearly 15 years after the first major battles—most Syrian refugees in neighboring states remain dependent on aid, excluded from formal labor markets, burdened by debt, and ill-prepared to rebuild their lives in a post-Assad Syria.

The refugee response is intimately tied to the Levant's stability, Syria's recovery, and Arab Gulf states' emerging geoeconomic vision for the region. The collapse of the Assad regime, the transitional government's successful international diplomacy, and Syria's enhanced value as a potential workaround to the Strait of Hormuz have created a rare opportunity to integrate the refugee response into a more forward-looking vision for the region. Refugees who can work, build savings, develop skills, and access legal documentation are better positioned to contribute to host economies, withstand aid cuts, and participate in Syria's reconstruction.

An approach that prioritizes refugee self-reliance and private sector integration would be significantly more cost-effective than the current model and, moreover, would better reflect the rapidly evolving aid environment. A November 2024 joint World Bank–UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) study estimated that if refugees globally were granted the right to full economic participation, they could meet up to 90 percent of their own needs, reducing the amount of international assistance required for the Middle East refugee response from \$6.2 billion to \$700 million each year.¹ Integrating refugees into investment-led growth sectors, infrastructure projects, and regional trade corridors would facilitate sustainable economic activity rather than indefinite aid dependency.

This report draws lessons from Jordan's response to Syrian refugees since 2012. It argues that the most important decisions shaping refugee outcomes are made during the early stages of displacement crises, or the "golden hour." Early choices about refugee mobility, legal status, labor access, documentation, camp policy, and local governance create long-term political and economic trajectories that become increasingly difficult to reverse. As the case of Syrian refugees in Jordan demonstrates, by failing to prioritize refugee inclusion early on, international actors locked themselves into a costly "care and maintenance" model that treated the symptoms of displacement while neglecting its structural drivers.

Gulf states are uniquely positioned to reformulate the Syrian refugee response because they have political influence in the Levant, long-term economic stakes in regional stability, and growing investments in transportation, energy, and logistics corridors linking the Gulf to Europe. In addition, the continuing reverberations of the Iran war have increased the Levant's strategic importance. By using their financial and political leverage to connect refugees to private sector opportunities through labor mobility, skills development, and job creation, Gulf states could turn refugee self-reliance into part of a broader regional connectivity agenda.

Western governments also have an important role. The United States and Europe retain deep institutional expertise on displacement crises, development finance, and refugee governance. A more effective model would combine Gulf capital and political influence with Western technical expertise and multilateral coordination mechanisms.

The costs of failing to seize this opportunity are great. Western aid cuts, a new displacement challenge in Lebanon, and deepening economic crises across the Levant threaten to destabilize refugee-hosting states and undermine prospects for recovery. Trapping refugees in informality and dependency makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, onward migration, and renewed instability.

The question is no longer only how to sustain refugees until conditions improve, but rather how to drive an investment-recovery-resilience nexus to ensure that displaced Syrians can contribute to the economic and political transformations reshaping the region. The future of the Syrian refugee response is increasingly tied to the future order of the Middle East itself.



OMAR ALBAW/AFP via Getty Images

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, a UN official called an NGO leader in disbelief. The Lebanese Ministry of Labor had just issued study permits to a group of Syrian refugees who were participating in a job training program.² For years, UN agencies and Western donors had been unable to convince Lebanese officials to approve such permits. However, the backers of this initiative, the Jeddah-based Islamic Development Bank and the Dubai-based Ghurair Foundation for Education, directly reached out to the ministry and convinced them to change course.

This episode foreshadowed a broader shift in the politics of displacement in the Middle East. Gulf states increasingly possess forms of political leverage and economic influence that Western donors lack, and they are willing to use it. As the Levant enters a new period

of geopolitical and economic transition, those advantages may prove decisive in shaping the future of refugee policy and regional stabilization.

Western donors struggled to transition beyond the humanitarian phase of the Syrian refugee response. From 2015 to 2024, donors gave UN agencies \$26 billion for the regional refugee response, seeking to deliver emergency assistance, prevent state collapse, and contain onward migration.³ These efforts helped millions of Syrians survive displacement, but efforts to build more durable solutions fell short as international donors largely failed to create sustainable pathways toward refugee self-reliance or to prepare refugees for eventual return. In fact, most refugees were unable to build savings, develop skills, or secure their most basic daily needs. The strategy left many of the 3.9 million refugees who remain in the region increasingly more vulnerable to Western aid cuts, economic crises across the Levant, and the ripple effects of the war with Iran, among other threats.⁴

Despite these challenges, new opportunities have emerged to transform the refugee response. The collapse of the Assad regime, the Syrian transitional government's successful international diplomacy, and the promise of multi-billion-dollar Gulf investment deals in Syria have created openings to facilitate sustainable returns and to rethink the region's approach to displacement.⁵ The 2026 war with Iran has also forced Arab Gulf states to explore alternative economic corridors to reduce their reliance on the Strait of Hormuz. As a result, Gulf states have an opportunity to integrate refugee policy into their broader strategy for reshaping the regional order and bolstering connectivity and economic integration.

The costs of failing to adopt a new strategy are severe. Aid cuts are already exacerbating Syrians' precarity in the Middle East.⁶ The UNHCR has had to make cuts totaling 43 percent to its programs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, "forcing families to choose between food, medicine, and rent."⁷ These cuts are fueling tensions between refugees and host communities,

undermining Syrians' ability to rebuild their lives in Syria, and pushing more Syrians into the black and illicit markets.⁸ Although hopes emerged that Gulf states would increase their humanitarian aid immediately after Western donors slashed their budgets, the war with Iran could cause Gulf states to cut aid as well.⁹

Absent international will for either resettling refugees



Displaced Syrians return to Damascus, Syria, on January 15, 2025.

or for integrating them fully into host communities, the key to stabilizing host countries, facilitating refugee returns, and stemming flows of forced migration lies in finding ways for refugees to meet their essential needs without relying on as much external support. In late 2024, a joint World Bank–UNHCR report estimated that granting refugees full economic participation would allow them to cover 90 percent of their needs themselves. In turn, that would cut the amount of international assistance required for refugees in the MENA region from \$6.2 billion to \$700 million each year.¹⁰

As Gulf donors rethink their regional strategies, they should focus both on enabling refugee self-reliance and on more proactively facilitating voluntary return.¹¹

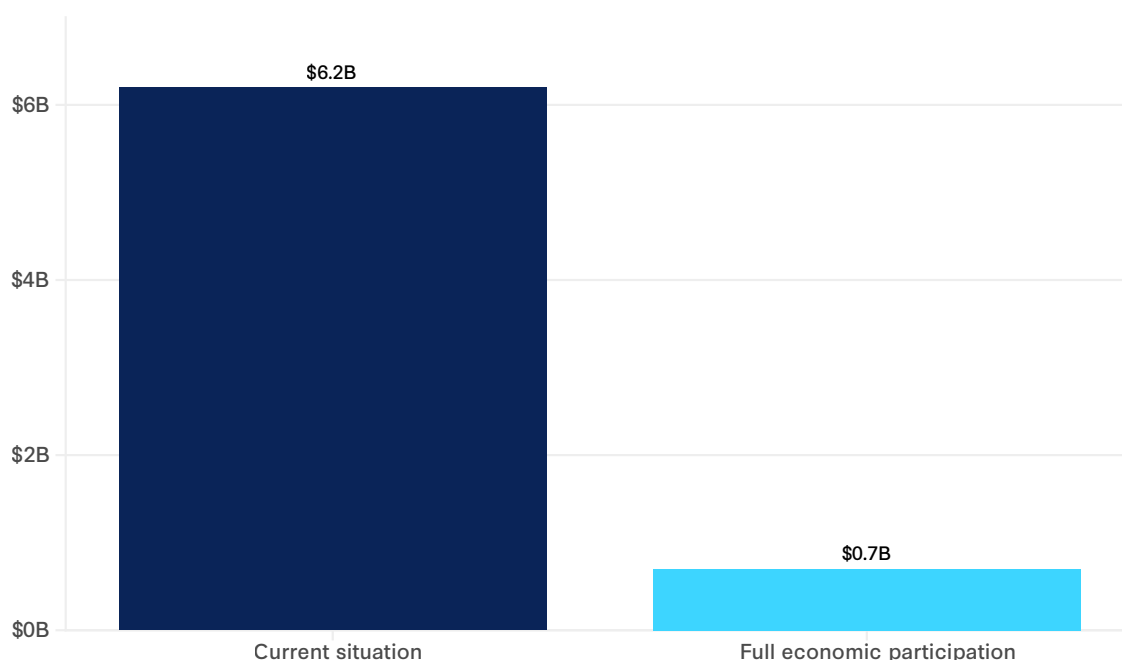
Gulf states must learn from Western donors’ failures over the initial decade-plus of the Syrian refugee response and leverage their unique position to advance a more sustainable model of refugee inclusion.

REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE

“Self-reliant” refugees are those that can meet their essential needs and live in dignity, even if they lack full rights within a country. Enhancing refugee self-reliance was a core objective of the flagship international framework for global refugee responses in 2018, and it continues to be cited as a key aim in UN documents.¹² Unsurprisingly, the income-generating component of self-reliance often gets the most attention as donors have tried

Figure 1: The Economic Dividend of Giving Refugees Labor Rights

Annual costs for refugee subsistence in the MENA region by economic participation scenario



Source: World Bank and UNHCR, *Economic Participation and the Global Cost of International Assistance in support of Refugee Subsistence Needs* (New York: World Bank–UNHCR, November 2024), 37, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/UNHCR-WB-2024-economic-participation-and-global-cost-of-assistance-for%20refugees-subsistence-needs.pdf>.

to expand refugees' access to formal job opportunities, offered trade incentives if companies in host countries hire refugees, and funded livelihoods training initiatives to prepare refugees for job opportunities.

Yet most refugees fail to achieve self-reliance for myriad reasons. They must navigate restrictive job markets, which is especially challenging given the fraught politics and unique challenges they frequently face. Refugees have restricted access to formal jobs and limited mobility, while often also lacking legal documentation and, relatedly, being unable to open bank accounts.¹³ The burden is particularly heavy for women, many of whom have additional social obligations and restrictions. Finally, most self-reliance strategies depend on refugees filling openings in host countries' labor markets, which overwhelmingly comprise positions citizens do not want to fill. Therefore, refugees become a cheap labor force for undesirable work.¹⁴

Host governments have legitimate reasons to resist refugee self-reliance. Several states in the Middle East have hosted Palestinian refugees and their descendants for more than 75 years. Moreover, at times, the presence of refugees has posed serious security risks to host governments, such as the Black September conflict of 1970–71 in Jordan and persistent security issues with Palestinian camps in Lebanon.¹⁵ Host governments worry that allowing refugees to

be self-reliant will ensure their indefinite presence, even after aid flows dry up. They want richer countries to do more to share the burden of global displacement.

Despite the numerous challenges refugees and the countries that host them face, because the international refugee regime is so broken, self-reliance is often the best option for refugees and host governments. If refugees can achieve self-reliance, they can insulate themselves from the effects of international aid cuts, contribute to local economies, and build the skills and resources that facilitate voluntary return. The benefits of refugee self-reliance extend beyond the refugees themselves to the countries that host them. Through supporting refugee self-reliance, host governments can protect themselves from aid shortfalls, benefit from boosts in human capital and international investment, and encourage donors to redirect short-term humanitarian aid to longer-term national



Seamstress Um Riad in the Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan, in 2017.

development projects that benefit their own citizens in tandem. To achieve self-reliance, however, refugees need help from international actors to overcome the unique challenges they face. Efforts aimed at improving refugees' economic inclusion in Uganda, Kenya, and parts of Europe have already produced clear positive results.¹⁶

Enhancing refugee self-reliance can also bolster regional stability in the Middle East. Giving refugees a chance to live with dignity in host communities or to return to their homes can slow the brain drain of outward migration, attract foreign investment, and help build bridges between Middle Eastern states to bolster economic integration. As the war with Iran has demonstrated, a more interconnected region is critical to the national security of states across the Middle East—more extensive regional integration offers additional options to import and export critical goods, while also advancing economic diversification away from hydrocarbon revenues. Moreover, greater private investment in infrastructure—a key feature of integration—is critical as the region reorders itself in the aftermath of the war.

Yet international efforts to increase refugee self-reliance in the Middle East have largely failed. International actors have been unable to convince host countries to grant most Syrians permission to work, frequently failing to overcome local opposition to refugee inclusion. Refugees thus have been pushed into the unskilled, informal sector and, as a result, many have resorted to negative coping strategies, such as child labor and early marriage. In

addition, some host countries have limited refugees' access to education, healthcare, and housing, resulting in additional challenges to self-reliance.

Overcoming the obstacles to refugee self-reliance is critical to stabilizing the MENA region. When considering the refugee crisis generally—and the Syrian refugee crisis in particular—the questions that emerge are: What explains international actors' failure to build refugee self-reliance in the Middle East? Why have the tens of billions of dollars spent on refugee responses failed to secure a sustainable solution to mass displacement? At the end of the day, the answer to both questions is politics.



If refugees can achieve self-reliance, they can insulate themselves from the effects of international aid cuts, contribute to local economies, and build the skills and resources that facilitate voluntary return.

THE POLITICS OF REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE

Competing political and institutional interests have crippled efforts to build refugees' self-reliance in the Middle East. Some actors have resisted efforts to wean refugees off aid, some have failed to devote sufficient political capital to reform efforts, and some have had an interest in concealing failed efforts to build self-reliance.

Host countries have provided a global good by generously hosting millions of refugees for over a decade with insufficient resources to meet their needs. Yet, at the same time, the same host countries have worked to prevent refugees from establishing roots that could induce them to stay, including by limiting their access to education, work, and basic services. Host countries have legitimate concerns about tensions between refugee and host communities and do not want refugees to receive special treatment or opportunities that their citizens lack, or to the detriment of their own citizens. As a result, countries have insisted that host communities must benefit from international aid in tandem with refugees. Moreover, host countries have largely resisted efforts to advance refugee self-reliance, fearing that donors could use it to justify even greater reductions in international aid.¹⁷

Donor governments have prioritized efforts to keep Syrians out of their own countries, frequently avoiding long-term commitments to refugee-hosting states and instead renewing short-term aid programs. After donating tens of billions of dollars to the refugee response, donor fatigue set in,

and multiple donor governments reduced their aid. Yet, rising anti-migrant sentiment at home has given them an interest in being seen to be providing for refugees in the Middle East and taking action to keep them there. As well as publicizing externalization agreements, donor governments are incentivized to cite impressive figures about the number of refugees that have benefited from the programs they fund.

Humanitarian organizations share donors' desire to cite impressive beneficiary numbers, thereby justifying their donors' support. These organizations use the figures to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs and to justify the continuation of aid flows. Similarly, the fear of losing aid contracts disincentivizes sharing information about unsuccessful interventions. Some humanitarian organizations go so far as to seek to maintain their centrality in the refugee response, even as refugees' displacement extends beyond an emergency phase.¹⁸ Despite their good intentions, however, many of these organizations lack the skills and capacity to implement successful development interventions and, as a result, many efforts to bridge humanitarian and development responses have not yielded notable success.

Refugees must navigate conflicting interests when it comes to self-reliance. Many worry that accepting jobs in host countries could threaten their eligibility for humanitarian aid or third-country resettlement. At the same time, they want to secure decent work. Numerous refugees do not want to accept jobs in poor conditions merely for the sake of having jobs. They have professional

aspirations and preferences about where they live, and some even fear losing credibility when applying for future skilled professions. Their precarious statuses in host countries frequently deter them from organizing politically to advocate for solutions for fear of host government retribution.

Businesses must be willing to hire refugees for self-reliance strategies to work. Most private sector actors lack an understanding of the ways in which they can engage with refugee communities. Many businesses simply want to hire the cheapest available labor with the relevant skills, regardless of workers' immigration statuses, which leads them toward migrant workers rather than refugees, whose employment can be more politically sensitive. Yet some companies recognize the unique value-add refugees can bring, in particular seeing refugees as resilient, entrepreneurial, and investable.

By not tackling competing interests head-on and working to bridge them, various actors' tactical efforts to enhance refugees' self-reliance have resulted in a strategic failure.

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

This report proposes a new way for international donors and aid actors to approach mass displacement in the Middle East. Given Western governments' shift away from foreign humanitarian assistance and the new geoeconomic landscape that is emerging in the region after the war with Iran, the report focuses on the increasingly important roles that Gulf governments—and increasingly private sector actors—can play. Specifically, this

report argues that if donor governments devote more political capital to advancing refugee self-reliance in the early phases of a refugee crisis, they can unlock myriad benefits in the longer-term. These include reducing the amount of humanitarian aid needed, limiting the drivers of instability and irregular migration, improving economic conditions in host countries, and giving refugees more dignity. The approach outlined here is based on a growing body of evidence from around the world that demonstrates that allowing refugees to live and work where they want leads to the best economic outcomes for both the refugees and the countries that host them.¹⁹ Refugee self-reliance is a realistic aim, as seen in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, but it has not yet been achieved in the Middle East.



If donor governments devote more political capital to advancing refugee self-reliance in the early phases of a refugee crisis, they can unlock myriad benefits in the longer-term.

The report focuses on the response to Syrian refugees in Jordan between 2012 and 2026, for several reasons. First, Jordan is a key ally of both Western and Gulf donor governments and has hosted large communities of displaced Syrians, Palestinians, and Iraqis, as well as smaller groups of refugees from other countries, for decades. Moreover, the country has received substantial international aid and has shown a willingness to enact reforms to facilitate limited inclusion for refugees.

Using the case of Syrian refugees in Jordan, the report explores decisions that international donors and their implementing partners must make to tackle the obstacles to self-reliance at different stages of a displacement crisis. Countries hold back in their efforts to facilitate self-reliance early on in a refugee response to their own detriment. In fact, as the case study of Jordan reveals, failing to devote political capital to securing refugee inclusion in host countries during key moments sets a response to displacement on an increasingly costly pathway.

The report is based on fieldwork conducted in Jordan, Syria, and Qatar between 2023 and 2026; insights gleaned from the author's previous trips to Lebanon and Türkiye; and additional remote interviews conducted with key stakeholders in Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). More than 100 interviews—with current and former government, humanitarian, and development officials, and with analysts, private sector representatives, and members of refugee communities, further inform this project. The report also

draws from expert roundtable discussions in Washington, D.C., and focus group discussions with Syrian and Iraqi refugees residing in Jordan. Most of the information cited from the interviews and focus groups has been anonymized to allow interviewees to share their insights frankly.

CSIS formed a senior-level advisory board to provide strategic guidance at various stages throughout the project. The board consists of former government officials, leading academics, and practitioners with decades of experience working on the response to refugee emergencies in the Middle East and beyond, and of experts who have experienced forced displacement themselves.

THE IMPERATIVE OF A NEW APPROACH

Despite newfound optimism that Syrian refugees may be able to return home following Bashar al-Assad's ouster and flight to Moscow in 2024, mass displacement remains a critical challenge in the Middle East. Globally, record numbers of people are displaced, and the average duration of displacement is longer than ever. Moreover, many of the countries that host large numbers of refugees in the MENA region are experiencing historic economic crises. At the same time, Western governments are cutting their international aid commitments, and aid shortfalls for long-term refugee responses will reach historic highs in 2026.²⁰

The current strategy of short-term relief without long-term self-reliance is unsustainable and even counterproductive. Keeping refugees on the cusp of destitution

will fan intercommunal tensions, further strain host countries' economies, and risk broader regional instability. Donor governments and their implementing partners must reckon with the failures of the current approach and adopt a strategy that overcomes silos, is politically feasible, and has genuine impact.

To date, Gulf state donors have not led the international refugee response. However, amid growing Western aid cuts, increasing desire throughout the region for economic diversification, and ongoing conflict in Iran, Gulf states have the rare opportunity to advance refugee self-reliance, facilitate sustainable voluntary returns, and stabilize the broader Levant by capitalizing on their unique value-add. Specifically, Syria's importance to the Gulf is growing: Not only is a stable Syria critical to broader stability in the region, but the country is also emerging as a key transit point.

Gulf states must learn from the mistakes of Western donors, build on the latter's successes, wield their own political leverage, and apply lessons from their own experiences of transitioning from state-centric economic models and diversifying their economies. In fact, supporting refugee self-reliance would serve their national security interests. Gulf states have a direct interest in supporting the stability of host countries in the Levant—they can benefit from developing human capital and engaging with it to advance their national economic transformation plans, and, moreover, they can bolster their relationships with key states in the region. Gulf donors know that they lack the depth of experience in refugee

interventions of Western donors, but they want to learn from them.²¹ This report is an effort to facilitate that process.



Gulf states must learn from the mistakes of Western donors, build on the latter's successes, wield their own political leverage, and apply lessons from their own experiences of transitioning from state-centric economic models and diversifying their economies.



KHALIL MAZRAAWI/AFP via Getty Images

THE GOLDEN HOUR

Initial Emergency Response

In trauma medicine, the “golden hour” refers to the critical period immediately following injury when prompt medical intervention dramatically increases survival chances. Failure to act decisively during this early window can lead to irreparable damage, even if the consequences are not immediately apparent. This concept has been integral to saving the lives of U.S. servicemembers.

In June 2009, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates ordered the military to ensure wounded soldiers in Afghanistan received appropriate medical care within that initial golden hour after injury. The mandate required the military to overcome numerous logistic, geographic, and bureaucratic challenges to reach injured servicemembers in rural parts

of Afghanistan. To fulfill this mission, the military sent more medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) helicopters to Afghanistan, deployed mobile surgical teams closer to the battlefield, and changed blood transfusion protocols to provide accelerated care. These efforts required more resources, but the results were clear—ensuring treatment within the golden hour of injury resulted in nearly doubling the survivability rate of U.S. servicemembers, saving an estimated 359 lives within five years (June 2009–March 2014).²²

The golden-hour framework offers a powerful tool for understanding—and improving—responses to refugee crises. An influx of refugees represents a form of societal trauma for both the displaced and host communities. On the one hand, refugees are fleeing violence or repression, abandoning their homes and most of their possessions in search of safety. On the other, host communities—many of which experience significant challenges themselves—are suddenly inundated with vulnerable people in need of humanitarian aid. As the below analysis reveals, the early “golden hour” decisions policymakers make establish the trajectory for years, potentially decades, to come. The early choices influence everything from social cohesion and economic stability to the long-term fiscal burden on host nations and international donors. Though the cost of failing to create the foundations for refugee self-reliance may not become apparent for many years, by that point, the damage is much harder to reverse.

As this report demonstrates, strategic interventions during this critical early

phase can significantly enhance refugees’ capacity to become self-reliant, unlock latent economic potential, mitigate the risks of prolonged aid dependency, and lay the foundations for greater stability and prosperity. The golden-hour framework requires a surge of resources and a clear plan to overcome political, bureaucratic, and logistical challenges. Forward-looking interventions leverage skills that refugees bring with them, preserve human capital, foster more productive relationships between refugees and host communities, and help attract more sustainable streams of funding. Early interventions can also avoid the entrenchment of vested interests that lock in a costly “care and maintenance” approach to displacement.



The early “golden hour” decisions policymakers make establish the trajectory for years, potentially decades, to come.

SECURITIZATION AND SHORT-TERMISM

Host governments are the most influential actors during the initial chaos of an influx of refugees, and their decisions set the longer-term trajectory of their country’s national security, economic stability, and social cohesion. Host governments decide

whether to allow refugees in and recognize their legal status as refugees, determine which rights they receive, and direct refugees to settle in refugee camps or urban areas. They also choose which parts of their bureaucracy lead the refugee response, which are responsible for implementing policies, and whether they actually implement those policies or not. Many host governments opt for a centralized approach, though some delegate key responsibilities to local government officials. Finally, host governments decide whether—and to what extent—they cooperate with the international aid ecosystem, including setting out a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities for aid organizations or keeping them undefined. These choices profoundly shape refugees' and host communities' well-being and opportunities but are not unilaterally made. In fact, because host governments require external resources to manage any significant influx of displaced people, donor governments are able to exert varying levels of influence over the hosts' decisions, a leverage that can prove

crucial to facilitating a successful long-term response.

Host governments primarily see large, sudden refugee influxes as a security challenge. As they have little ability to vet waves of foreign nationals arriving under chaotic circumstances, governments fear violent extremists infiltrating refugee groups, worry about refugees upsetting delicate sociopolitical or demographic balances, and believe refugees will strain already limited economic resources and public services. These perceptions frequently lead to security-focused responses in which ministries of interior and national security assume leading roles, their perspectives dominating overall strategy. Host governments can then use the security imperative to justify extraordinary measures, such as declaring states of emergency or enacting restrictive movement policies.²³

Particularly when it occurs early in the crisis (during the golden hour), this securitization embeds a bias against self-reliance within the refugee response from the very beginning. Officials from line ministries, such as agriculture, economic development, health, or labor, as well as local officials, must often defer to security apparatuses for initiatives concerning refugees, or at least seek their approval for them. This dynamic inevitably marginalizes officials and technical experts who might champion more opportunity-



Syrian refugees at Rukban border camp in March 2017.

driven, developmental approaches to displacement. The effects on refugees' freedoms and opportunities are long-lasting.

A confluence of interests from various other actors encourages short-term crisis management over long-term strategic planning.

Donor governments often prioritize life-saving emergency aid over longer-term planning, the latter of which requires more complex and politically sensitive negotiations with host governments and longer-term financial commitments. Donors' domestic political pressures and election cycles also favor visible humanitarian interventions over sustained or strategic engagement. Finally, humanitarian aid budgets are usually larger and easier to access than stabilization and development funding.

Humanitarian actors also prioritize life-saving interventions, such as food, shelter, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). However, the desire to protect their own centrality in the aid response can deter humanitarian organizations from engaging with development or private sector actors at the critical golden-hour phase.

Refugees themselves also favor short-term support. Many do not want to establish roots in what they hope is a temporary haven. With uncertainty and limited options, relying on humanitarian aid is the most rational short-term survival strategy, especially if host governments block refugees' pathways to income-generating activities. Moreover, most refugees avoid living in refugee camps if possible, instead residing in the cities and towns of host communities.

Private sector actors rarely see an influx of refugees as creating investment, employment, or business opportunities. More specifically, these actors do not anticipate refugees remaining long-term, failing to appreciate the skills and assets the latter bring and fearing that attempting to engage with them could result in legal penalties.

The convergence on short-term, reactive solutions during this golden hour can delay and undermine efforts to foster refugee self-reliance, setting a pattern of dependency that becomes increasingly difficult and costly to reverse. As the below case study of Jordan's response to Syrian refugees reveals, these considerations, along with geopolitical interests and legacies of displacement, shaped Jordan's early decisions regarding the Syrian refugee response and determined the trajectory of the wider response.

LET REFUGEES SETTLE OR PUSH THEM OUT?

While it may appear simplistic, the foundational decision by a foreign government in any refugee response crisis centers on whether to officially allow the displaced people to enter. If a government does not agree to host refugees or to grant them regular status, those who enter cannot have a dignified existence and often fail to secure their most essential needs.

Jordan's decision to let Syrians enter and the status it granted them was informed by its previous experiences of hosting large populations of displaced people.

The government has provided shelter for successive waves of refugees, even though it is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.²⁴ These earlier influxes forced the government to think about whom to accommodate, who belongs in Jordan, under what terms refugees can enter and stay, and what mechanisms are required to maintain security. An examination of Jordan's varying responses to refugee influxes reveals that the country's political relationships with refugees' countries of origin and the level of international donors' interest have shaped how the government treats different communities.

Hosting Palestinians revealed both the security risks of accommodating large numbers of displaced people and the possibility of long-term displacement. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees entered Jordan in 1948 and again in 1967, and Jordan ultimately naturalized most, giving them full rights. Integration was not without challenges, however, and the 1970–71 Black September conflict highlighted the threat that displaced groups can pose to Jordan's national security. Palestinian groups called for the ouster of the Jordanian king, escalating to armed conflict between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Jordanian army. Although Jordan ultimately expelled the Palestinian guerrilla fighters and reestablished control, the government has subsequently adopted more exclusionary policies toward refugees, including issuing Palestinians temporary passports rather than full citizenship.²⁵ Moreover, decades after both major waves of displaced Palestinians, hundreds of thousands remain in Jordan, demonstrating the

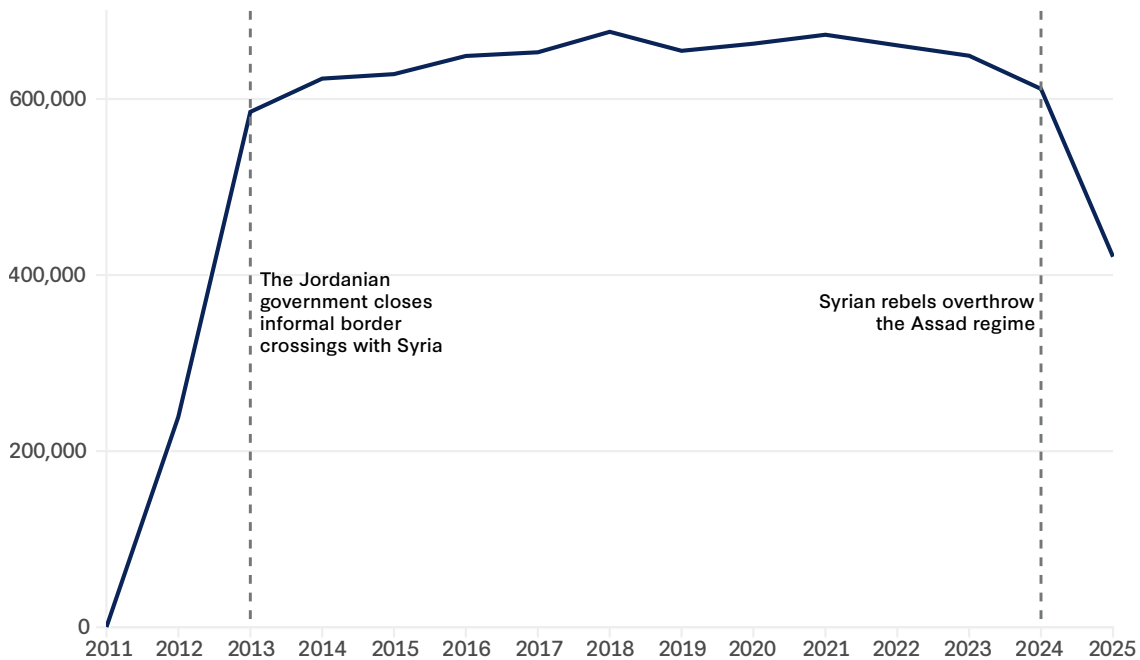
reality that many refugees ultimately never return to their home countries.

The subsequent influx of Iraqis gave Jordan additional lessons in refugee management. Between 1990 and 2002, as many as 300,000 Iraqis sought refuge in Jordan. Jordan accepted them as “guests” rather than refugees, denying both legal residency and the right to work to most. This does not seem to have been the result of the economic aid needs of the Iraqi refugees. In fact, many had a higher socioeconomic status than previous—and subsequent—refugee flows. Instead, Jordanians' grievances focused on the inflationary pressures Iraqis put on rents and other costs. Foreign governments and international organizations did not exert significant pressure on the Jordanian government to adopt more inclusive policies.²⁶ Finally, most Iraqi refugees in Jordan have moved on, resettling in secondary countries or returning home; as of 2025, the UNHCR reported that just over 12,400 remain in Jordan.²⁷

When violence began to spread in Syria in 2012, the Jordanian government again opened its borders and gave Syrians shelter. Jordanians were largely supportive of accepting Syrian refugees, expressing sympathy for those who shared ties of history, kinship, and language. The government also chose to refer to Syrians as refugees, rather than guests. Its motives for doing so were both political and financial.²⁸ Jordan's King Abdullah opposed the Assad regime and was the first Arab leader to call for Assad to step down in 2011. Moreover, the king recognized an opportunity for Jordan to benefit from international aid for

Refugees under the UNHCR's mandate in Jordan

Number of Syrian refugees

Source: UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder."³⁰

the refugee response.²⁹ Jordan's welcoming of Syrians and the rights it provided them were a critical foundation of the longer-term response and facilitated refugees' ability to increase their self-reliance, as will be discussed below.

WORK WITH THE INTERNATIONAL AID ECOSYSTEM OR NOT?

Host governments' decisions to engage with international aid actors have profound effects on subsequent efforts to build meaningful self-reliance among refugees. Granting international aid actors access to refugee communities creates an ecosystem of aid organizations, some of which evolve into sustainable vehicles for social services. Governments that engage

with the international aid system open themselves up to political pressure from donor governments, and such leverage—if exerted—can be used to facilitate self-reliance. Existing without international aid does not denote true self-reliance for refugees, as they often cannot secure their essential needs nor live in dignity.

Jordan's history with Palestinian and Iraqi refugees taught the government the geopolitical and economic values of hosting refugees. The experience it gained through engaging with international aid agencies proved critical when the Syrian refugee crisis began.

The United Nations has provided important support to Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East, including the nearly 2.4 million currently in Jordan.³¹ In fact, the

United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has become a quasi-state institution and is one of the largest employers in Jordan.³² Through its support for Palestinians, the United Nations developed a close relationship with the Jordanian government and established itself as the foundation of the international response to refugees in Jordan. In turn, it also created space for other humanitarian organizations to operate in Jordan to serve refugees.³³

Although Iraqis in Jordan initially gained little international attention, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought focus to their plight, with different groups exploiting the crisis to advance their own objectives. Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, NGOs highlighted Iraqis' displacement as evidence of the failures of the Western intervention in Iraq. As international attention to the plight of Iraqis grew, Jordan developed an interest in inflating estimates of refugees and their impact on Jordan's economy to secure more international attention and support.³⁴ In 2007, a Jordanian interior ministry official stated that Jordan was hosting 750,000 Iraqis at a cost of \$1 billion per year.³⁵ However, an independent study by a Norwegian NGO estimated that just 161,000 Iraqis were present in Jordan at the time, with few of them in need of aid given their predominantly middle class backgrounds.³⁶ Despite evidence indicating much lower numbers, the Jordanian government's inflated figures took hold



A man sorts tomatoes at Arbat refugee camp near Sulaymaniyah, Iraq's Kurdistan region, in November 2013.

Younes Mohammad/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images

and were widely cited by international governments and organizations.

Jordan's strategy of highlighting and exaggerating the number of Iraqis served its economic interests. Jordan has sparse agriculture, few natural resources, and high unemployment. Providing too much support directly to Iraqis risked sparking a backlash from Jordanians who were struggling. As such, Jordan convinced donors to funnel much of their aid through state institutions, bolstering its own fiscal situation, building its institutional capacity, and ensuring that poor Jordanians benefited in tandem with Iraqi refugees. Moreover, by only allowing NGOs to operate under tight regulations, Jordan was able not only to maintain its sovereignty but even strengthen its own institutions.

Western donors were happy to support this setup, as they wanted to protect

Jordan's peace treaty with Israel, which would be threatened by any breakdown in stability in Jordan. As a result of its push for aid based on its inflated numbers of Iraqi refugees, from 2007 to 2009, Jordan received almost \$400 million in aid designated specifically for Iraqis.³⁷ The United States boosted security and economic support for Jordan at the same time, making Jordan the largest recipient of aid per capita for refugees in the world.³⁸

As a result, by the outbreak of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2012, Jordan had established a precedent of working with the international aid ecosystem to secure flows of international aid. This collaboration formed a bedrock of support upon which other civil society and humanitarian organizations could build to engage with Syrian refugees. Moreover, the Jordanian government saw benefits in allowing NGOs to operate beyond immediate cash injections. NGOs helped relieve pressure on Jordan's public services, employed many Jordanians, attracted additional flows of international aid, and boosted the local economy. Facilitating NGO activity allowed

for a greater variety of interventions that were more tailored to local needs, thereby advancing refugee self-reliance.

SET UP CAMPS OR NOT?

Though offering some benefits to both refugees and host countries, refugee camps restrict self-reliance in various ways. They often entail restrictions on mobility and the ability to work, both critical to economic independence. Camps are also often designed as sites for humanitarian aid distribution, not economic exchange, and, as a result, are frequently disconnected from regular markets and services, meaning they create parallel, aid-based economies. Yet refugees living in camps often benefit from free services, including housing, utilities, healthcare, and education, often provided by international aid organizations.

Jordan's policy on refugee camps has shifted in recent decades. The bitter experiences of insecurity and prolonged displacement in Palestinian refugee camps, combined with the lack of international advocacy,

dissuaded the Jordanian government from setting up additional camps after the late 1960s.³⁹ Moreover, the more educated Iraqis settled in urban areas, existed largely without international aid, and became essentially invisible. They did not require the services available in camps.

Although Jordan initially allowed displaced Syrians to settle in urban areas, the government decided to set up refugee



Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, 2025.

camps as the flow accelerated. In 2012, the government set up the Zaatari refugee camp. Despite Jordan's initial aversion to establishing refugee camps (following their experiences with the Palestinian camps established in the late 1940s and 1960s), officials believed that they could avoid repeating the problems of the Palestinian camps by tightening security.⁴⁰ After establishing it in mid-2012, Jordanian authorities directed Syrian refugees to the Zaatari refugee camp, located about 10 kilometers east of Mafrq and 30 kilometers from the Syrian border. At its peak, OXFAM estimates that the camp held around 150,000 refugees, equivalent to the fourth-largest city in Jordan.⁴¹ Security lessons from earlier experiences with long-standing Palestinian camps heavily influenced the design of Zaatari, with government officials imposing a rigid grid layout on the camp and strictly controlling movement out of it, making it nearly impossible for resident refugees to achieve self-reliance.⁴² As the influx of refugees continued and security concerns remained, the Jordanian government established the Azraq refugee camp in 2014, locating this second camp in a more remote region, further precluding refugee self-reliance.

The Jordanian government has strategically employed both camps to advance key national interests. First, Zaatari and Azraq became powerful symbols of the Syrian refugee crisis, increasing interest among donors. The experience with Iraqi refugees had taught the Jordanian government that increasing refugees' visibility strengthened its appeals for international aid, a lesson it has successfully employed in the case of displaced Syrians.⁴³ Second,

by formally and, more importantly, jointly establishing the camps with the UNHCR, the government shifted responsibility for funding and managing the refugee response to international actors.⁴⁴ The camps thus eased pressure on public services. Third, security was easier to maintain in intentionally designed and regulated camps than it had been with the more urban dispersal of the earlier Iraqi refugees. In Zaatari and Azraq, Syrians were physically confined and the Jordanian police and gendarmerie dealt with riots.⁴⁵ Fourth, the camps' purposeful locations advanced the government's narrative that it was only providing temporary protection to Syrians. Established in remote areas of northern Jordan, Zaatari and Azraq physically distanced Syrians from major cities in Jordan (Zaatari is 70 km away from Amman) while keeping them close (30 km) to the Syrian border. Finally, through a combination of legal, geographic, and security restrictions, the camps helped protect poor Jordanians' livelihoods. Unlike earlier Iraqi refugees, the uneducated, poorer Syrian refugees disproportionately lived in Zaatari, the design of which prevented them from competing with Jordanian workers in the labor market and thereby depressing wages.⁴⁶ The Jordanian government was not alone in its strategic use of the Syrian refugee camps; the UNHCR was also able to benefit from the camps' establishment.

In 2009, the UNHCR had released an "Urban Policy," which some scholars considered "the beginning of the end" of encampment policies.⁴⁷ In the years that followed, the organization continued shifting its global operations away from

camps. Just a year after setting up Zaatari, the UNHCR went so far as to declare that its policy was “to avoid the establishment of refugee camps, wherever possible” and for camps to be “phased out at the earliest possible stage.”⁴⁸ Despite these public declarations, the UNHCR did not resist the Jordanian government’s plans to establish refugee camps for displaced Syrians. In fact, the agency benefited from Zaatari in particular. When the UNHCR took over management of the camp, it secured a long-term stream of funding. Images of Zaatari feature prominently in fundraising appeals by the UNHCR, and the camp has emerged as a common site for foreign officials to tour when visiting Jordan.⁴⁹

While both the Jordanian government and the UNHCR benefited from the decisions to set up the Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps, those same decisions undermined the ability to achieve self-reliance not only for the Syrians living within the camps, but also for the majority of Syrians outside the camps. Images of Zaatari and Azraq kept donor governments and aid organizations’ focuses away from urban refugees, leading to the camps swallowing disproportionate amounts of international aid. In Jordan, the Zaatari and Azraq camps only house 20 percent of Syrian refugees but are believed to receive 80 percent of humanitarian funding.⁵⁰ Overall, refugee camps do not foster self-reliance for their residents.

WHICH DOCUMENTS TO ISSUE TO REFUGEES?

Legal documents are the key to refugees achieving autonomy, dignity, and



In Jordan, the Zaatari and Azraq camps only house 20 percent of Syrian refugees but are believed to receive 80 percent of humanitarian funding.

opportunity. Refugees possessing them are able to enter the labor market, protect themselves from exploitation, prove their qualifications, and exercise various rights, including inheritance, property, and civil rights. Legal documents also facilitate refugees’ mobility. Overall, the longer refugees go without legal documentation, the greater their challenges become.

Although not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor to its later 1967 Protocol, Jordan allowed Syrians to register with the UNHCR according to the terms of a 1998 memorandum of understanding.⁵¹ As a result, Syrians received Asylum Seeker Certificates (ASCs) and, after 2014, also received a service card from the Ministry of Interior.⁵² These documents protected the Syrians who held them from forced deportation and, furthermore, granted them access to free education, subsidized healthcare, and other public services.

Yet, these documents are insufficient to establish self-reliance as they do not cover

key aspects of Syrians' daily lives. For example, birth certificates, passports, marriage certificates, and national identity cards are needed to facilitate marriage, secure inheritance rights, guarantee citizenship, and prove kinship relations; neither ASCs nor the later service cards serve the same functions.⁵³ As forcibly displaced people, many Syrians lack correct (or complete) documentation, which limits their ability to exercise these civil rights. The absence of these documents also prevents access to certain services and even hinders eligibility for third-country resettlement.⁵⁴

Documentation challenges become more difficult over time. Some refugees, for example, use incorrect documents to obtain new documents, creating multiplying layers of legal and bureaucratic challenges. Advocacy efforts by NGOs throughout Syrians' displacement have helped fill holes in Jordan's legal framework for documentation and expand access to legal documents, addressing some concerns. Although most humanitarian providers do not focus on documentation issues in the early (golden-hour) period of a displacement crisis—focusing understandably on the more immediate needs of survival—addressing this issue early on can avoid problems snowballing in the long term and furthermore create a foundation for refugee self-reliance. Therefore, resolving issues relating to documentation should be a key advocacy point during the golden hour of a refugee crisis.



The Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, shown in 2025.

📷 Bernd von Jutrczenka/picture alliance via Getty Images

WHO SHAPES THE REF- UGEE RESPONSE?

In the chaos of a refugee influx, decisionmaking regarding refugee response is a fraught exercise. Many host governments let security officials dictate the terms to other actors, including line ministries, local government officials, and civil society—resulting in security concerns dominating, even precluding, others and impeding longer-term strategies aimed at refugee self-reliance. In addition, centralized decisionmaking undermines the ability to advance context-specific approaches that facilitate win-win solutions and achieve local buy-in, further undermining efforts at self-reliance.

THE JORDANIAN GOVERNMENT

Decisionmaking in Jordan is highly centralized. A group of elite Jordanian officials make all major decisions for the refugee response, including the king, the

chief of staff, the prime minister, and the interior minister.⁵⁵ One Western embassy official said “the Royal Court sets the terms and red lines” for all decisions related to refugees.⁵⁶

In January 2013, the prime minister issued a decree establishing the Syrian Refugee Camp Affairs Department, which reported to the Ministry of Interior. In March 2014, this department became the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate (SRAD), gaining responsibility for all Syrian refugees in Jordan. As is typical for refugee units within host governments, SRAD coordinated closely with the UNHCR, eventually mirroring the UNHCR’s objectives, methodologies, and priorities.⁵⁷ Such refugee-focused units rarely contain development economists and consequently often do not understand the complicated economics surrounding displaced persons. Despite this significant capability gap, all other Jordanian officials from line ministries that engaged with refugees had to coordinate with the SRAD. The result was the emergence of a parallel system to the Jordanian government’s usual decisionmaking process, which often failed to coordinate with other government departments.

Municipal and local actors in Jordan have limited ability to shape the government’s refugee response. The Jordan Response Plan, which the government launched several years into the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, dictates the outlines of how municipalities and other local officials respond to refugee-related issues, with the national government maintaining political control over local officials.⁵⁸ For



The government’s centralized approach has constrained municipalities’ ability to tackle the local consequences of refugees’ presence in their communities, leading to increased aid dependency and decreased opportunities for self-reliance.

example, ministerial approval is required for various aspects of municipalities’ work, including hiring, expanding service delivery, and even approving certain types of expenditure, a cumbersome, expensive process.⁵⁹ Municipalities also struggle to access external sources of finance or raise their own forms of income as a result of the centralized nature of Jordanian decisionmaking regarding refugee response.⁶⁰ The government’s centralized approach has constrained municipalities’ ability to tackle the local consequences of refugees’ presence in their communities, leading to increased aid dependency and decreased opportunities for self-reliance.

Despite the centralized power of the Jordanian state, it is not a monolith. Some Jordanian officials have adopted a strikingly more inclusive stance toward Syrian refugees. For example, shari'a courts document births, marriages, and deaths, and resolve disputes. These religious courts provide Syrians with access to affordable, legally recognized documentation and prevent many from becoming stateless.⁶¹ However, because Western aid actors have little experience engaging with local religious officials, the two systems largely operated independently from each other.

INTERNATIONAL AID RESPONSE

The humanitarian tool kit available at any one time reflects the politics and preferences of the donors stocking it. In the case of Syrian refugees, because Western government donors prioritized stability and migration control, they primarily funded the UN-led response in close coordination with the Jordanian government. Some donors sought to tie their funding to certain policy reforms, including encouraging the Jordanian government to grant refugees access to education and health services. However, during the emergency (golden-hour) phase, Western donors did not attempt to wield significant leverage over the Jordanian government as they did not want to jeopardize their relationships with a key ally.⁶²

It took several years for Western government efforts to integrate development actors and the private sector into the Jordan refugee response to gain steam. When the Syrian crisis took off, numerous international organizations had processes to bring in private sector support and experienced

actors in cases where the host countries were ill-equipped to respond to an influx of displaced persons. However, in 2011, multilateral development banks such as the World Bank lacked the tools to intervene with displaced communities in middle-income states such as Jordan.⁶³

Western donor efforts to work with local government officials produced valuable results, but the potential of this level of engagement with municipalities was not fully realized. Some pilot programs demonstrated the benefits of engaging with municipalities, such as revealing local communities' priorities and concerns regarding refugee management and identifying win-win solutions. USAID's Community Engagement Project worked in local municipalities hosting large numbers of refugees to strengthen community cohesion and resilience. The project allowed strained municipalities such as Um al Jamal in northern Jordan, which saw its population double after the influx of Syrians, to provide basic services, but it also gave local citizens a process through which they could identify and address their priorities and collaborate on solutions.⁶⁴ Yet, despite various local success stories, no comprehensive plan existed to engage with officials at the municipal level.⁶⁵ Many international donors feared that efforts to empower municipalities to play a bigger role in shaping the refugee response would provoke the ire of the central government.⁶⁶

The Syrian crisis represented an important step in Arab Gulf states' growing role in international humanitarian responses. Kuwait hosted the first major UN

conference to raise funds for Syrians in January 2013, securing pledges of over \$1.5 billion from the international community. Moreover, the largest pledges—\$300 million each—came from Kuwait and the UAE.⁶⁷ In addition to funding for the multilateral system, Gulf donors supplied important amounts of direct emergency aid, often working through the established networks of Islamic charities and foundations. While significant in its relief results, this support rarely resulted in policy changes as it was not tied to reform efforts.⁶⁸

WHICH RIGHTS TO GRANT REFUGEES?

From the outset of a refugee emergency, the decisions host countries make about refugees' rights form the foundation upon which refugees' ability to attain self-reliance depends. In addition to the right to access public services, critical rights include the right to work and the right to form organizations. As the case of Syrian refugees in Jordan illustrates, granting these rights early in particular gives refugees the ability to build a foundation of self-reliance.

In the initial months of the crisis, Jordan granted Syrians access to some services. In 2012, for example, the government allowed registered refugees living outside camps access to health facilities for free. In 2014, as the influx of people continued, the government altered course, requiring

these registered refugees to pay the rate the Jordanians without health insurance paid to access healthcare.⁶⁹ By integrating refugees into the public health system, the Jordanian government helped control communicable diseases, ensure vaccine coverage, and monitor maternal and child health. At the same time, making Syrians pay for healthcare prevented the emergence of a preferential system for refugees, which could have sparked social tensions. In addition, the government granted Syrian children access to public schools, quickly adopting a double shift system, whereby the same school buildings are used for two separate educational sessions, with the second session primarily serving refugee children. This prevented the emergence of a large uneducated youth population, which could have posed security risks. Finally, by publicizing their efforts at refugee inclusion, the Jordanian government strengthened its funding appeals.



A Syrian construction worker in Jordan in 2018.

Displaced Syrians fell under Jordan's foreign labor law, which required individuals to apply for permits to work legally. Work permits were difficult to obtain, and only small numbers were issued during the early years of the crisis.⁷⁰ As a result, most Syrian refugees worked in the informal sector. International donors made insufficient efforts to incentivize Jordan to grant refugees the right to work, or to make the work permit process easier. This resulted in refugees depending on income from the informal economy, their savings, and international aid, instead of becoming self-reliant. Moreover, by thus depleting their resources in the early years of a refugee crisis, displaced people exacerbated their vulnerability, particularly as the crisis stretched on.

Despite domestic fears, large-scale studies have found little evidence that Syrians depressed wages for low-skilled Jordanians in the early years. In fact, the studies revealed that refugees tended to work in sectors that Jordanians were leaving, and work permit regulations prevented them from competing with higher-skilled Jordanians.⁷¹ However, the effects were uneven, with some wage depressions in northern governorates where refugees were more highly concentrated.⁷²

Prior to the Syrian refugee crisis, several Jordanian laws already restricted freedom of association.⁷³ Jordan placed further restrictions on refugees' ability to organize, citing security risks, and security services closely monitored refugee activities. Within the refugee camps, UN agencies and the Jordanian government recognized and regulated the formation of

committees to manage camp affairs and coordinate services, but such efforts were largely absent for refugees in urban areas. Restricting refugees' ability to organize made it much more challenging for them to articulate their needs and priorities to actors involved in the refugee response. These constraints meant it was harder for refugees' perspectives to be integrated into aid planning activities and for them to present solutions to their own challenges.

CONCLUSION

Creating a foundation for refugee self-reliance in the early stage of a crisis requires political interests to align. Donor governments must have an interest in supporting refugees, and host countries must also either see the benefit of supporting refugees or be open to being convinced that it is in their interests to do so.

Donor governments have a duty to share the burden of hosting refugees and should provide support to facilitate emergency assistance to both refugees and host communities in need. At the same time, donors should advocate for certain policy decisions during the golden hour of a refugee response. This cooperative framework can foster conditions in which refugees eventually become self-reliant.

Most importantly, donor governments should expend greater political capital on encouraging host countries to adopt policies that are inclusive of refugees. Specifically, host countries must be encouraged to grant refugees rights, the most critical of which are freedom of

movement and ability to work. Therefore, donors should oppose the establishment of refugee camps, particularly in remote areas, and try to convince host countries to grant refugees the ability to work.

If host countries resist refugee inclusion efforts during the early phase of displacement, donors should push for several smaller steps that can facilitate refugee self-reliance at later stages if the displacement becomes protracted. First, donors should advocate for refugees to be able to maintain their legal status and secure official documentation. Furthermore, donor governments should ensure that data related to skills and job aspirations are collected from refugees at this stage. Then, donors should engage with development actors to conduct economic studies into job creation and build connections with private sector actors to collaborate on job creation initiatives aimed at the refugees. Finally, donors should advocate for an inclusive decisionmaking process for refugee management, which allows for input from line ministries, municipalities, civil society organizations, and refugees themselves. A more inclusive approach will help identify win-win opportunities and create a solid foundation on which donors can later advance more impactful self-reliance interventions.



If host countries resist refugee inclusion efforts during the early phase of displacement, donors should push for several smaller steps that can facilitate refugee self-reliance at later stages if the displacement becomes protracted.



LYNSEY ADDARIO via Getty Images

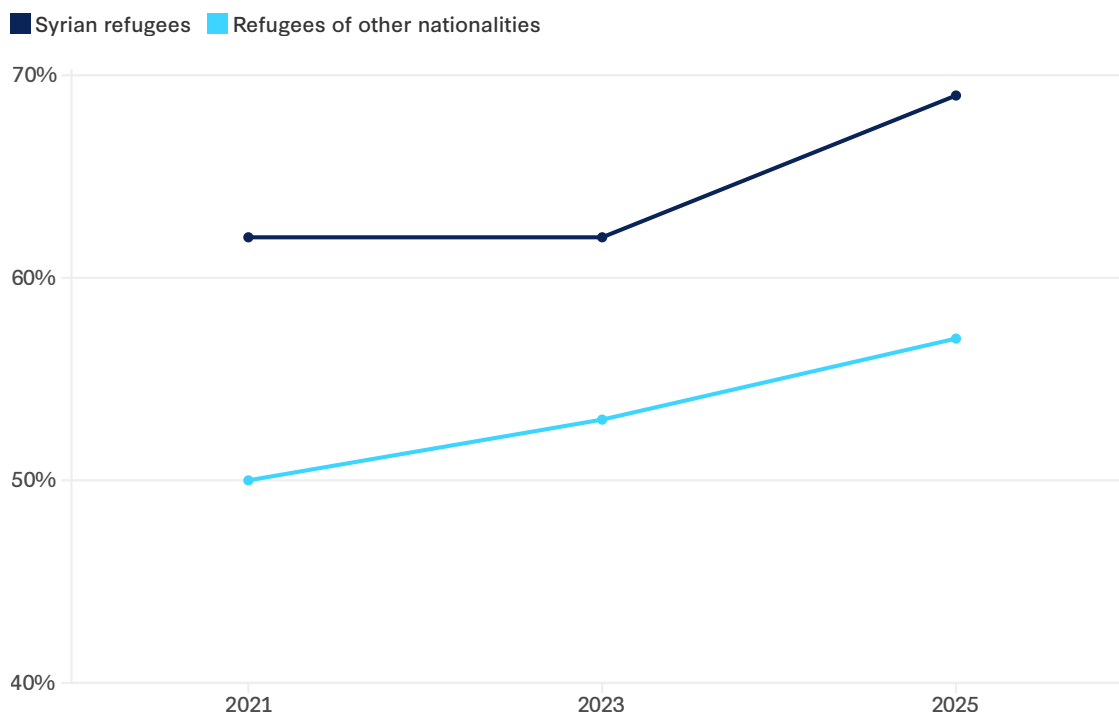
PALLIATIVE CARE

Managing Protracted Displacement

Despite being one of the world's most famous refugee camps, no one knows quite how much money has been spent on operating the Zaatari camp in Jordan. In fact, the opaque financial data reporting practices of the Jordanian government and humanitarian organizations make it impossible to know how much aid has even been spent on a single sector. It is clear, however, that emergency aid operations are significantly more expensive than holistic development projects that benefit host communities and refugees in tandem. A 2025 analysis of the costs of the WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) sector in Zaatari found that a network serving 80,000 refugees between 2014 and 2019 cost at least \$55 million and had a lifespan of 10 years.⁷⁴ In contrast, rehabilitating and expanding the existing WASH system in a neighborhood of a nearby Jordanian city would have cost less than half as much, served more than three times the number of people (260,000), and lasted for three times as long.⁷⁵

Figure 3: Syrians' Poverty Increases as the Crisis Drags On

Poverty headcount rate, refugees in host communities in Jordan



Source: "Jordan: Vulnerability Assessment Framework: Socio-economic Survey on Refugees (May 2026)," UNHCR, May 2026, 34, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/jordan-vulnerability-assessment-framework-socio-economic-survey-refugees-may-2026>.

The staggering inefficiency in aid spending surrounding the Zaatari camp reflects broader issues in donors' approaches to protracted displacement.⁷⁶ As refugee crises extend beyond the initial emergency phase and last for five or more years, the traditional three durable solutions of return, resettlement, and integration become increasingly elusive. Refugees feel unable to return, third-country resettlement is only an option for a small portion of refugees, and host countries oppose efforts to integrate refugees fully. With no clear solution in sight, policymakers tend to adopt a "care and maintenance" approach. This strategy is akin to providing long-term palliative care to a patient with a chronic, yet treatable condition. The refugee response manages symptoms—offering just enough support to keep refugees alive

and relatively stable—but avoids the more complex, systemic interventions needed to address the root causes of the condition, such as legal status, access to livelihood opportunities, or political resolution. Recent data from the United Nations show the ineffectiveness of the international aid response in improving Syrians' conditions in Jordan. A 2026 UNHCR study found that the rate of poverty among Syrian refugees living in host communities increased from 2021 to 2025 and was higher than refugees of other nationalities living in Jordan.⁷⁷ Overall, care and maintenance interventions entrench aid dependency, erode refugees' dignity, and become increasingly costly over time.

The continuation of emergency-style programming is the result of a kind of

“benign conspiracy,” not of a deliberate or nefarious decision by involved actors.⁷⁸ Most actors involved aim to help refugees, but interventions such as water trucking, providing food baskets, or offering ill-conceived vocational training interventions unintentionally perpetuate dependency, stagnation, and hardship. A strategy based on refugee management is one of least resistance. It is a less politically costly response for donor governments, a lower-commitment approach for host countries, and a profitable enterprise for aid providers. Strategies focused on refugee inclusion and self-reliance, however, are more challenging. The Jordanian government opposed Zaatari’s integration into local WASH networks as it feared it would signal the permanence of refugees. But avoiding sensitive discussions between refugee and host communities—particularly regarding refugee inclusion—sets both communities on a pathway to a more acute crisis. When donor fatigue sets in and aid is cut, a deterioration of refugees’ conditions can spark deadly political, social, or security crises.

Refugees’ problems are not incurable. If international actors took the necessary actions to overcome political obstacles and unlock credible pathways to refugee self-reliance, they could directly tackle the core of the problem, spark economic growth, and help prepare refugees for return. To do so, donor governments must be prepared to spend political capital to tackle obstacles head-on.

COLLIDING INTERESTS

As displacement lengthens, the actors’ interests in the refugee response come into tension in new ways.

Host governments generally experience rising hostility toward refugees from their citizens as displacement becomes more protracted. The influx of refugees often strains public services, makes nontradeable commodities more expensive, and exacerbates scarcity issues, including water insecurity. As a result, host governments are usually opposed to any livelihoods programs that are linked to refugees’ permanence for a range of reasons. First, many host governments express zero-sum mentalities about opportunities for refugees, conceptualizing opportunities for refugees as directly taking from their own nationals. Some governments believe that maintaining minimal standards for refugees makes them more likely to return home. In addition, host governments often prefer to continue an emergency-focused response because humanitarian instruments deliver money more quickly than development tools, and the influx of aid lightens the fiscal pressures of paying for services.

Donor governments know that host countries are providing a global good and are wary of supporting interventions that might provoke them or prompt instability. While many donor governments maintain that greater refugee inclusion will support stability, their own unwillingness to take in refugees makes it difficult for them to convincingly argue that refugees are an

economic asset.⁷⁹ Donors also face their own domestic pressures. Politicians want to demonstrate to their constituents that they are tackling displacement and so favor humanitarian programs over efforts to improve governance systems through development cooperation, which often have fewer tangible results. Donors also pressure NGOs to show more impressive results and cut overhead costs to demonstrate value for money to taxpayers. These pressures incentivize implementing partners to focus on quantitative indicators of impact.

Humanitarian actors have direct financial incentives to maintain their centrality in the refugee response. Although humanitarian groups often expand their focus to include livelihoods interventions as displacement extends, these actors often lack systematic competencies necessary to design effective programs, analyze results, and apply lessons.⁸⁰ Lack of expertise can cause them to support programs that are not aligned with local market needs. As one interviewee put it, humanitarian actors often supply carpentry tools for men and sewing kits for women, regardless of the needs of the local market.⁸¹ Others implement short-term programs that lack the necessary follow-up, rendering them ineffective. Without donor governments expending political capital to expand opportunities for refugees to work, humanitarian actors are forced to focus on niche opportunities, such as remote work or entrepreneurship, which are rarely credible options for more than a small portion of refugees.

Development actors have increasingly seen opportunities in engaging in contexts of

protracted displacement. These actors can help promote stability and strengthen host governments' governance and institutional capacities, while also expanding their own institutional mandates and tapping into new streams of foreign aid. Development actors have tried to develop new tools to help host countries—such as the World Bank's Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF)—and have deepened their partnerships with the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations.⁸² However, development actors tend to frame displacement as a technical or development challenge, which downplays the political nature of the problem and thus leads to treating the symptoms of displacement, not the root causes. Furthermore, these actors are accustomed to engaging with governments as clients and so often fail to exert political pressure for reform.

Refugees and migrants are forced to adapt to a rapidly and constantly changing aid landscape to secure their basic needs. Shifting aid priorities create perverse incentives for refugees to make sure that their situations match donors' criteria for continuing to receive aid.⁸³ The mismatch between refugees' skills and available jobs often becomes starker at this stage. Refugees participate in education or training programs that do not translate to legal work opportunities, so many are forced into low-skilled jobs in the informal sector. Many do what they can to stay as close to their home country as possible, preferring to live somewhere with a familiar language and culture, closer to family, and with a lower cost of living.⁸⁴ Some do not want to participate in livelihoods projects as they think they

will become less eligible for resettlement.⁸⁵ Others use income-generating activities to build up enough savings to travel irregularly to the Global North.

A concerted effort is needed to bridge these colliding interests, and this has rarely occurred. Too often, donors and their implementing partners pursue niche opportunities to circumvent host government restrictions, such as digital work, remote work, or entrepreneurship. These opportunities rarely represent a realistic solution for more than a small section of the refugee population. Without a clear inflection point to force a new approach, donors continue to support emergency interventions, refugees' vulnerability sharpens, and the toll on host countries grows as donor fatigue sets in.

INCENTIVIZING REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE

Donors' efforts to expand Jordanian institutions to be more inclusive of Syrian refugees—and thus promote self-reliance—have had limited success. In 2019, the UNHCR attempted to align the National Aid Fund (NAF), Jordan's social protection instrument, with support for refugees.⁸⁶ Funneling humanitarian assistance through the existing system would have proved more cost-effective and efficient.⁸⁷ But the NAF had different mechanics, selection criteria, and definitions of vulnerability, which stymied efforts to align the two streams. The efforts were further undermined by aid cuts, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and Jordan's growing financial challenges.

Aid actors have pursued assorted other strategies to encourage host governments to support refugee self-reliance. Some efforts built the Jordanian government's institutional capacity as part of the support aid actors provided to refugees. Jordan encouraged this approach, explicitly linking the refugee response with budgetary support from international actors. In 2015, for example, the Jordan Response Plan called for \$1.14 billion in direct budget support, seeking funds “at the Government's general disposal to support the mounting fiscal deficit incurred as a direct response of the Syria crisis.”⁸⁸

Various interviewees for this report argued that the international community has not done enough to convince the Jordanian government to facilitate refugees' self-reliance.⁸⁹ Some Western officials cited a general feeling that the international community has not lived up to its commitments in Jordan, although stakeholders in the refugee response have varying understandings of those commitments.⁹⁰ Others argued that international donors did not provide sufficient incentives to the Jordanian government. For example, most World Bank support comprises loans rather than grants. “Why should the Jordanian government pay for refugees to be employed when so many Jordanians are unemployed?” one Jordanian private sector executive said.⁹¹

JOB CREATION INITIATIVES

Donor governments have pursued efforts to create jobs for Syrian refugees and Jordanians in tandem. In addition to experimenting with a range of livelihoods

interventions for refugees, international donors trialed major initiatives to link economic development with refugee work, with varying levels of success.

The Jordanian government has continually resisted international efforts to open its formal labor market to refugees out of largely domestic concerns. Unemployment is a major problem in Jordan. The overall unemployment rate among Jordanians rose steadily from 13 percent in 2015 to a peak of 24.1 percent in 2021, before hovering between 21 percent and 23 percent from 2022 to 2025.⁹² Unemployment is even higher for women—32.7 percent—as of the first quarter of 2026.⁹³ Because of sensitivities about unemployment, it is difficult to publish studies about refugee employment or to advocate for refugee self-reliance programming.⁹⁴ The World Food Programme (WFP) commissioned the Boston Consulting Group to analyze refugees' economic participation within Jordan. They found that, excluding the effects of international aid, refugees'

economic participation in Jordan contributed 2.3 percent of Jordan's GDP in 2024, amounting to 832 million JOD (\$1.2 billion) annually.⁹⁵ However, discussion of refugees' economic contributions is so controversial that the WFP felt unable to publicize this finding widely.⁹⁶

Instead of fully opening the job market to Syrian refugees, the Jordanian government agreed to issue temporary work permits for a limited number of sectors, including agriculture, construction, and manufacturing.⁹⁷ These permits granted Syrians various rights and protections, but they came with a fee and various obligations, including paying into Jordan's social security system. Moreover, the sectors available are extremely limited and often do not align with refugee aspirations and skills. For example, one UNHCR assessment showed most Syrians aspired to work in closed sectors, such as medicine, IT, education, and translation.⁹⁸

Complicating the situation further is the fact that many refugees do not want work permits. The system is expensive, as an up-front fee is required, and there is no guarantee of securing a job. Furthermore, Syrians are hesitant to pay into social security programs when they do not expect to remain in Jordan long enough to benefit from them.⁹⁹ Some refugees fear that they would lose access to aid programs or have a lower chance of being resettled if they accept a formal job.¹⁰⁰ It is difficult to tell how many



The ILO and Jordan River Foundation launched an apprenticeship program teaching embroidery and sewing skills to Syrian refugees and Jordanian women, with a sales tie-up to IKEA, 2018.

Syrians have participated in the work permit program, as the total number of permits issued (over 446,000) includes renewals by the same person. In a sign of the failings of the system, some Syrians had permits for a few years then chose to go back into the informal sector.¹⁰¹

A dearth of data on Syrians' skills has further undermined job creation efforts. The UNHCR collected some data when refugees were first registered, but did not note sufficient information on employability, as that was not a priority during the initial phase of the crisis.¹⁰² In the years since refugees registered, many have gained new skills and changed their aspirations regarding sectors to work in, but no easy channels existed for them to share this information with international aid actors. Only in 2023 did the WFP

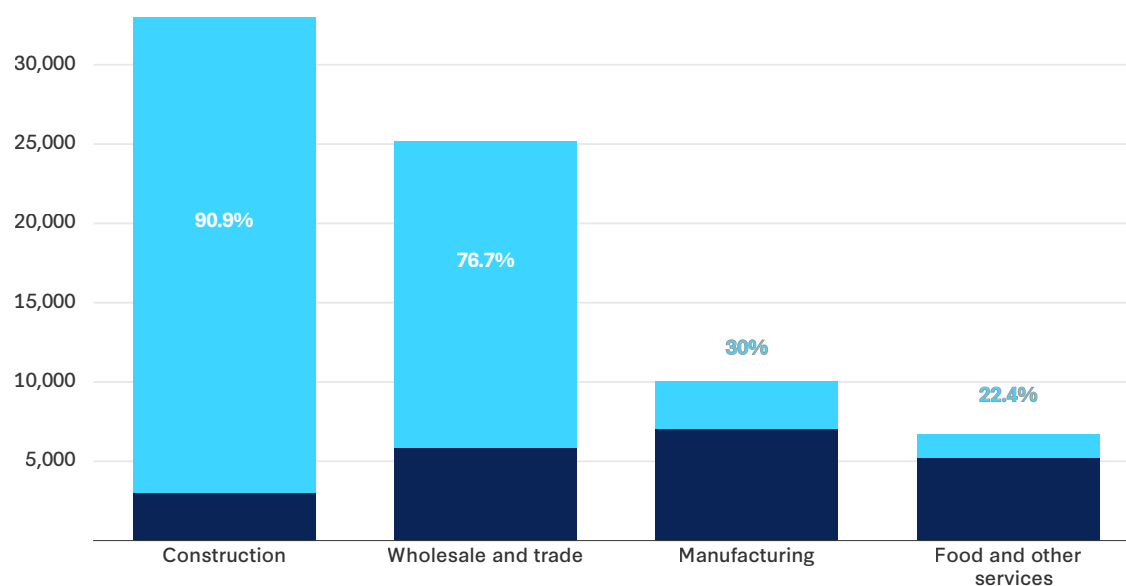
and UNHCR begin to collect new data on refugees' skills, which was completed in February 2024 and reached 120,000 households.¹⁰³ However, some Syrian respondents criticized the survey for being too broad and not allowing them to share their specific skills.¹⁰⁴

A mismatch exists between organizations' training programs and job opportunities. As the interviewee stated above, many humanitarian actors provide men with carpentry tools and women with sewing tools, regardless of whether there is wood to carve or demand for sewing. Moreover, Syrians said many vocational training programs are insufficient to make them qualified for jobs. One Syrian cited participating in a month-long programming training that proved not even nearly sufficient to work professionally as a programmer.¹⁰⁵

Figure 4: Refugees' Limited Interest in Work Permits

Estimated numbers of Syrians working with and without work permits, 2017

■ Estimated number of Syrians working with work permits
■ Estimated number of Syrians working without work permits



Source: "Work permits and employment of Syrian refugees in Jordan: towards formalising the work of Syrian refugees," ILO, June 28, 2017, <https://www.ilo.org/publications/work-permits-and-employment-syrian-refugees-jordan-towards-formalising-work>.

Donor governments also have unrealistic aims when it comes to job creation. A 2018 World Bank study found that creating a new job in Tunisia (also a lower-middle-income country) would cost roughly \$30,000.¹⁰⁶ Most donors balk at such costs and support implementers' proposals that cite being able to create a job for as little as \$500 in Jordan.¹⁰⁷ The drive for impressive beneficiary counts leads some organizations to pack trainings with too many participants.¹⁰⁸ Some refugee participants bemoaned the fact that such trainings wasted valuable donor funds.¹⁰⁹ They also said that trainings are often not offered in locations where refugees live, adding prohibitive participation costs.

Finally, the Jordanian economy has various structural problems that stifle job creation. The public sector dominates and absorbs a large share of skilled labor and the private sector is weak and underdeveloped as a result. With insufficient support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), opportunities tend to be seized by larger actors, and SMEs fail to grow. The Jordanian education system also fails to produce graduates with skills that align with the needs of the labor market. Internships are very rare, meaning that many graduates do not have any experience of the labor market when they look for a job.

THE JORDAN COMPACT

The Jordan Compact, launched in 2016, was an ambitious effort to turn the Syrian refugee crisis into a development opportunity.¹¹⁰ The idea was that Jordan would receive concessional financing and trade incentives from the European Union, including preferential tariffs on

garments and textiles produced in special economic zones in Jordan. In exchange, the Jordanian government would issue up to 200,000 work permits to Syrian refugees in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and manufacturing. Jordan also committed to enrolling all Syrian children in school. Ultimately, the initiative was designed to benefit Jordanians and Syrians in tandem and would enhance Syrians' self-reliance. The compact was announced with great fanfare and declared a success before it had been fully implemented.¹¹¹ A discussion immediately ensued about replicating it in Ethiopia.¹¹²

The compact did achieve some success. It facilitated an uptick in work permits for Syrians and reduced fees for those permits. In addition, Jordan agreed to remove restrictions for Syrians working in the food, tailoring, and crafts sectors, which expanded options for Syrian workers. Moreover, tens of thousands of Syrian children benefited from enrolling in school.

However, the compact failed to transform the underlying conditions for Syrian refugees. First, the scope of job opportunities provided was too narrow. The policy design did not integrate the perspectives of Syrian refugees and host communities sufficiently.¹¹³ For example, most Syrian and Jordanian women were not interested in jobs in special economic zones far away from where they and their families lived. As a result, by December 2016, only 30 Syrian refugees had entered the garment industry, far fewer than the target of 2,000.¹¹⁴ Jordanian businesses

also struggled to meet quotas because of the limited number of highly skilled Syrians in the target communities.¹¹⁵ Implementing agencies therefore began to focus on formalizing work for Syrians rather than creating new jobs or improving refugees' working conditions.¹¹⁶

The compact also failed to tackle the politics surrounding Syrians' self-reliance. It focused on economic opportunity and avoided more contentious issues such as refugees' legal status or mobility. As such, as one INGO official argued, it sought to "placate geopolitical interests" and was never "really intended to work."¹¹⁷ Moreover, in a sign of its transactional nature, the compact excluded all non-Syrian refugees living in Jordan. The compact also had inappropriate metrics of success, focusing on work permits issued rather than sustainable jobs created or increases in household income.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

As donors struggled to convince Jordan to expand formal job opportunities for Syrians, they began to focus on driving entrepreneurship. Syrian entrepreneurs would be the clearest embodiment of a win-win situation for Jordan and refugees, as such individuals would create jobs, spark economic activity, and attract investment. Syrians were seen as a credible target for entrepreneurship interventions; as one World Bank official said, "Syrians have entrepreneurship in their DNA."¹¹⁸

Yet few entrepreneurs succeed in any part of the world, and Syrians are no exception. Various interviewees criticized donors for assuming it could be a bigger



Yet few entrepreneurs succeed in any part of the world, and Syrians are no exception. Various interviewees criticized donors for assuming it could be a bigger part of the solution to Syrians' situation than is the case.

part of the solution to Syrians' situation than is the case.¹¹⁹ Most refugees go into entrepreneurship because it is the only option available to them, rather than because of a personal drive to form a successful business.¹²⁰

The government first allowed Syrians to establish home-based businesses in 2018. In 2021, Jordan eased regulations for registering home-based businesses in a few specific sectors, including food processing, tailoring, handicrafts, and digital services, but most professions and sectors remain inaccessible. Some at-home businesses have been successful, and it has proven a particularly good option for women, with 68 percent of at-home businesses owned by women as of early 2025.¹²¹

However, Syrian entrepreneurs have to overcome various legal, bureaucratic, and financial challenges to succeed. It has been difficult for them to attract investment due to constantly changing government regulations, and the government has not created an ecosystem that adequately supports SMEs.¹²²

DIGITAL, GIG, AND REMOTE WORK

Digital, gig, and remote work have come to be seen as opportunities for refugees who lack local labor rights but can earn an income online.

In 2020, the World Bank launched a five-year project, “Youth, Technology, and Jobs,” in Jordan, which sought to increase access to digitally enabled income opportunities for youth and to improve the delivery of digitized government services in Jordan. The \$200 million project included a \$36.9 million grant from the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF), a new tool to provide concessional financing to middle-income countries impacted by refugee crises.¹²³

The project has achieved success for Jordanians but has struggled to integrate refugees. The conditions of the GCFF loan required certain numbers of beneficiaries to be Syrians. One implementing partner organization ran a training program for graduates that required 15 percent of enrollees to be Syrians. However, because only Jordanians can legally access jobs in Jordan’s tech

sector, it proved challenging to encourage Syrians to participate.¹²⁴ Jordanian restrictions on the technology sector mean that the only option for Syrians is to start their own business or to work as a freelancer on a gig platform.

Interest in digital jobs has spread widely, and many humanitarian organizations have become involved in the digital sector. Mercy Corps’ Youth Impact Labs (YIL) program was the first in Jordan that focused on remote work and digital freelancing and was inclusive of refugees. With support from Google and Mastercard, the project created new work opportunities for more than 3,000 young Jordanians and refugees.¹²⁵ The YIL program also partnered with Bayt.com, the largest job-matching digital platform in Jordan, to expand the portal to blue-collar jobs, which increased job access for more vulnerable people. However, various



Syrian cook Malakeh Jazmati films video for her social media followers on March 6, 2021, in Berlin, Germany.

interviewees cautioned that digital aspects of many other livelihoods programs are “rarely relevant or well targeted.”¹²⁶

Remote work has been a subject of discussion in the humanitarian sector in recent years. Working remotely opens refugees’ access to global labor markets and allows them to bring income to their families and communities.¹²⁷ Remote work is a legal loophole for refugees in Jordan.¹²⁸ Women have cited remote work as being easier than other kinds of work, particularly because it allows greater flexibility if they also have childcare duties, does not incur transport costs, and, according to some Syrians, increases their productivity.¹²⁹

Different kinds of remote work require different levels of skills, and the marketplace reflects that. For example, Amazon Mechanical Turk is a crowdsourcing marketplace that allows businesses to outsource their processes and jobs to a global workforce.¹³⁰ Some tasks involve participants selecting which version of an advertisement they find more compelling, requiring a relatively low level of skills. However, it is very difficult for refugees in the Middle East to access these opportunities, and they pay very small amounts of money.¹³¹ Other tasks, such as data entry or graphic design, require a basic level of skills. The positions that get the most attention from the Jordanian Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship demand highly skilled workers, including those with advanced coding skills. Yet, many of these opportunities are not accessible for Syrian refugees because of Jordan’s work restrictions.

Additional obstacles further restrict the opportunities for remote work to only a small portion of Syrian refugees in Jordan. English proficiency is a huge barrier, and even low-skilled remote work platforms, like Mechanical Turk, require language skills.¹³² Younger Syrians have better English skills due to their schooling in Jordan and greater exposure to the language over the internet, but English remains a barrier to accessing these jobs for most Syrians. Payment is also a problem. Most refugees have mobile wallets, but these cannot accept payments from abroad—Jordanian terror financing laws limit refugees’ ability to receive payments from outside the country.¹³³ Some refugees use a Jordanian contact’s account to get around these constraints, but this is not a feasible solution for many refugees and entails risks of exploitation. Finally, remote work often entails very low wages. Syrian refugees working remotely compete with a global labor force, some of whom live in parts of the world with far lower living costs and therefore can accept lower wages. As such, remote work is more feasible for refugees living in camps, because they do not pay for rent, electricity, or healthcare.

MARKET SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT

Because of the difficulties surrounding sustainable job creation opportunities for Jordanians and refugees, some organizations utilize a “market systems development” (MSD) approach, which works to create demand for jobs. This type of approach does not just work to understand the causes of businesses’ failures but conducts systematic interventions to solve structural

problems in the wider market. An MSD approach is most successful in contexts with strong economies and robust entrepreneurial sectors.¹³⁴

Jordan's political economy creates a challenging environment for an MSD approach. Regulations would need to be streamlined for SMEs and startups, bureaucratic hurdles reduced, and competition and labor laws more stringently enforced. Such reforms can challenge entrenched interests, so high-level political buy-in will be needed. Moreover, an MSD approach would require Jordan to receive long-term and flexible streams of donor funding.

An MSD approach goes against all the key tenets of how donor governments traditionally work. First, it has an extended time horizon, only working over increments of five or more years. This timeline does not fit with typical donor planning cycles. Second, an MSD strategy does not facilitate short-term results that can be touted in time for donors' election cycles. Furthermore, it is difficult to directly tie results to donor funding. The strategy operates by influencing market actors, not by directly delivering services. As such, only a small number of aid organizations are mainstreaming an MSD approach in Jordan, including Mercy Corps. However, this approach is a critical element of a longer-term and more sustainable job creation strategy for refugees.

CASH ASSISTANCE

Aid organizations' inability to create sustainable jobs led some humanitarian

organizations to prioritize cash assistance for Syrian refugees. Providing cash directly to refugee households allows them to prioritize their own basic needs, while also injecting money into the local economy. In the absence of meaningful access to formal employment, cash assistance has provided a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. In Jordan, the UNHCR and WFP provide the largest cash assistance programs, and these efforts have prevented refugees from falling deeper into destitution. The World Bank estimates that the rate of poverty among Syrian refugees living in host communities would have increased from 69 to 77 percent if they had not received cash assistance.¹³⁵ A Johns Hopkins study also found that multipurpose cash assistance



Providing cash to refugees addresses the symptoms of their economic hardship, while leaving its causes unaddressed. For cash assistance to be more effective, it should be tied to expanded labor market access and legal reforms.

improved health outcomes for refugees, increasing care-seeking for child illness and reducing hospital admissions.¹³⁶

However, cash assistance is a Band-Aid solution and does not enable self-reliance. The UNHCR's cash programs alone disbursed \$85 million in 2016 and rose to approximately \$180 million by 2022.¹³⁷ But even with that cash assistance, poverty levels rose. In 2025, 69 percent of refugee households outside of camps still fell below the poverty line.¹³⁸ Even generous cash transfer programs cannot substitute for sustainable livelihood pathways, given the unique legal and bureaucratic obstacles refugees face.¹³⁹ Cash transfers to refugees can also exacerbate tensions with host communities.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, providing cash to refugees addresses the symptoms of their economic hardship, while leaving its causes unaddressed. For cash assistance to be more effective, it should be tied to expanded labor market access and legal reforms. Unless it is used as leverage over host communities to implement these reforms, it will remain an expensive but insufficient response to refugees' economic exclusion.

LOCALIZATION

Funneling a greater share of international aid to local actors could advance refugee self-reliance in multiple ways.¹⁴¹ Local organizations have a deeper understanding of the economic, social, political, and cultural dynamics within their communities, and can therefore better design and deliver programs that are tailored to refugees' needs,

constraints, and opportunities. Local actors also benefit from greater access and trust with displaced communities, which increases refugees' engagement with their efforts. Organizations that build local networks can help create a more sustainable environment in which refugees can access jobs and social services on their own. Even small increases in support can be transformative when done through local actors. One Jordanian NGO that conducted training programs received a grant that dedicated 5 percent of the funds for capacity development. The NGO used the extra funds to hire a consultant who developed policies on the protection of vulnerable individuals and data protection. Those policies were a requirement for the NGO to apply for certain grants from international donors. The NGO secured additional grants and expanded its operations as a result.¹⁴²



Despite the donors' ambitious goals on localization, UN agencies and international NGOs continue to drive the refugee response in Jordan, for a variety of reasons.

International donors have long articulated ambitious localization aims. In 2016, more than 60 of the world's biggest donors and aid organizations signed the "Grand Bargain" to make aid "as effective and efficient as possible, and to get more means into the hands of people in need."¹⁴³ The agreement set a target of increasing the percentage of funding to national and local NGOs from 2–3 percent to at least 25 percent by 2020. The Grand Bargain explicitly sought to empower local actors, enhance efficiency, integrate contextual understanding into programming, promote sustainability and resilience, improve accountability and participation, and address power imbalances in humanitarian funding.

Despite the donors' ambitious goals on localization, UN agencies and international NGOs continue to drive the refugee response in Jordan, for a variety of reasons. The Jordanian government lacks trust in the capacity and abilities of local NGOs to deliver effective programs.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, international actors prefer working with national groups, as the latter are better able to meet donors' stringent reporting requirements than local groups. Moreover, NGO workers describe international donors as being rigid and not allowing for real community engagement, feeling that they know best.¹⁴⁵ Jordanian NGO workers also expressed feeling that international donors lack genuine interest in improving their interventions, particularly as donors quickly lose interest and change their priorities.¹⁴⁶

Jordanian organizations themselves face myriad obstacles to playing a greater role in the refugee response. The government places legislative and political restrictions

on their ability to grow, while the typical operating practices of international aid agencies are not conducive to local groups' participation.¹⁴⁷ To name just a few of these obstacles, aid coordination meetings are often conducted in English, usually take place in Amman (which may be far away from where local NGOs operate, requiring significant time and expenses to attend), and, according to many local aid workers, involve unequal, tense international-local relations.¹⁴⁸ NGOs also described a culture of fear, with challenging donors forcing their local partners to exaggerate numbers. One NGO worker joked that if numbers about donors' impact were real, there would be no unemployment in Jordan.¹⁴⁹

To advance the localization agenda and benefit from local organizations' comparative advantages in advancing refugee self-reliance, international donors need to engage in the genuine codesign of programs, provide support to build NGOs' capacity, and give local groups space to experiment and optimize their interventions.

PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

The aid and private sectors operate quite differently, frustrating efforts to build partnerships between the two. Some humanitarian workers are wary of working with the private sector, believing that all employers care about is finding the cheapest labor possible without regard for workers' rights.¹⁵⁰ It is true that private sector actors are rarely motivated by humanitarian goals and are primarily concerned with their bottom lines.

Moreover, appeals to engage with refugees through corporate social responsibility or in-kind donations are seldom successful.

Yet the case is growing for private sector actors to engage with displaced communities for their own benefit. Many business leaders have come to see refugees as hardworking, innovative, and loyal workers. The challenge for companies lies in identifying refugees who could fill existing openings and needs.¹⁵¹

CONNECTING REFUGEES WITH PRIVATE SECTOR OPPORTUNITIES

Since the mid-2010s, efforts to connect refugees with private sector opportunities in Jordan have expanded. Many refugees are already active in the private sector, but because they work informally, their activity goes unnoticed. Part of promoting new refugee-private sector connections involves bringing existing activity to light. Multiple organizations, such as the Refugee Investment Network, have conducted studies to highlight both refugees' involvement in the private sector and

“refugee lens investment” opportunities at the enterprise and fund level.¹⁵²

International aid actors in particular are increasingly interested in investing in refugees. The UNHCR began working with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) on refugee livelihoods in 2016, and the collaboration has become more systematic since. In December 2022, the UNHCR launched a partnership with the IFC that sought to demonstrate the viability of investments in forced displacement contexts.¹⁵³ The Swedish and British governments funded a World Bank project on private sector engagement with refugees between 2018 and 2022. The governments provided support to companies that employ Syrians, helping promote exports and assisting with technology. This project created 1,930 jobs, 328 of which went to refugees.¹⁵⁴

A general issue with job matching for refugees is that many young people lack work experience in the private sector. Because internships are not common in the Middle East, some aid organizations have

developed their own internship matching programs. LOYAC is a social enterprise working to improve the employability of youth in the Middle East, including refugees. It provides programs to more than 2,500 students or fresh graduates in Jordan every year, and more than 17,500 of its participants were placed in internships between 2018 and 2024.¹⁵⁵ However, these efforts have not received significant attention



A job fair for refugees and migrants in Berlin, Germany, in 2018.

from international donors and have yet to be institutionalized at scale by Jordanian universities. As a result, the potential of internships as a bridge between the education system and private sector employment has not been fully realized.

Many Arab Gulf states are attempting to diversify their economies as part of their strategic visions to reduce reliance on hydrocarbon revenues. Although they are prioritizing the integration of their own nationals into these plans, their economies still rely on foreign labor to a large degree. As a result, many opportunities exist for Jordanians and Syrians to work for Gulf-based companies.¹⁵⁶ Arabic-speaking workers have an advantage over migrant workers from other parts of the world, but English language skills are often required as well. In addition to language barriers, the jobs are not always marketed well. Few systems exist to connect Jordanian and Syrian workers with these opportunities.

Elsewhere, summits have proven successful in securing private sector pledges to work with refugees. The Sunflower Project, an initiative from the TENT Partnership for Refugees, for example, sought to accelerate the economic inclusion of Ukrainian refugee women.¹⁵⁷ A 2023 summit in Paris secured pledges from 41 companies to provide over 250,000 Ukrainian women and other refugees with jobs and training across Europe, a record for commitments to advance refugees' economic integration.¹⁵⁸ Senior EU officials praised the initiative and stated that it was "imperative that refugees are offered longer-term inclusion and hope through integration into the labor market."¹⁵⁹

To date, no such summit has focused on the Middle East. A Jordanian government official bemoaned the lack of business interest in working with displaced populations in Jordan, saying she had hoped for big pledges from the likes of IKEA, Samsung, and Toyota.¹⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

By certain metrics, the refugee response in states bordering Syria has been a success. Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye, and Iraq have hosted some of the largest numbers of refugees per capita in the world for over a decade without large-scale intercommunal violence, state collapse, or widespread famine. Host governments continue to engage with the international aid ecosystem to support refugees, donors have provided tens of billions of dollars in humanitarian and development aid, and the region averted a far worse crisis.

However, avoiding disaster is not the same as achieving a sustainable solution to Syrians' displacement. Donor governments wasted money, failed to achieve transformative change for refugees or host communities, and have even undermined refugees' ability to return to Syria.

In failing to dedicate more political capital to creating the conditions in which refugees can achieve greater self-reliance, donors have missed important opportunities.

As a refugee crisis becomes protracted, donors should enforce a transition from an emergency to a development-led approach. They must be prepared to wield political leverage to secure the necessary

reforms in host countries to facilitate win-win solutions. Donors must clearly articulate to host countries that they are not prepared to waste money on loophole solutions for refugees or the continuation of inefficient emergency interventions.

In addition, donors should clearly define the roles and responsibilities of different aid actors in the response (such as UN agencies) to ensure that only those with adequate expertise are implementing certain kinds of interventions. For example, the UNHCR is best placed to serve its protection mandate and to fundraise for and bring attention to displaced communities, while the Food and Agriculture Organization is best placed to design interventions to build agricultural livelihood opportunities for refugees.

Donors must also adopt a longer-term approach to building refugee self-reliance. They should focus on building stronger systems of governance that can serve host communities and refugees in tandem, such as cash assistance programs. Donors should prioritize a demand-side approach to help create sustainable job opportunities for refugees in host countries' markets. They should work with the private sector early in a displacement crisis and facilitate linkages between displaced people and companies. This longer-term approach must also avoid unrealistic or arbitrary indicators of impact, which skew aid projects in counterproductive ways and incentivize short-termism.



Avoiding disaster is not the same as achieving a sustainable solution to Syrians' displacement. Donor governments wasted money, failed to achieve transformative change for refugees or host communities, and have even undermined refugees' ability to return to Syria.



HIBATULLAH BARAKAT/AFP via Getty Images

A NEW GOLDEN HOUR?

The “Humanitarian Reset,” Syrian Returns, and the Aftermath of the Iran War

The collapse of international aid in 2025 shocked the humanitarian system. The Trump administration dismantled USAID, and major European donors slashed their aid spending. UN aid chief Tom Fletcher said a “profound crisis of legitimacy, morale, and funding” must prompt a “humanitarian reset.”¹⁶¹ He called for a renewal and reimagining of the humanitarian response, a shift of power to local actors, and the transformation of global humanitarian operations to be lighter and nimbler. Then, the war with Iran roiled the economies of hydrocarbon-exporting states in the Gulf, with wide-reaching ripple effects for states throughout the Levant. The war also prompted a drive toward a new geo-economic order, which seeks to reduce reliance on the Strait of Hormuz and leverage the Levant as a connective node between the Gulf and Europe.

These developments represent a new golden hour to radically reimagine the refugee response. The moment also marks a potential inflection point in the Syrian refugee crisis, coinciding with new hopes for refugee return after the ouster of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. From June 2024 to January 2025, the percentage of Syrian refugees reporting to the UNHCR that they intended to return to Syria in the next 12 months shot up from 1.7 percent to 27 percent.¹⁶² These hopes intensified when President Trump announced the lifting of sanctions on Syria in May 2025, and the United States repealed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act sanctions in December 2025, which removes legal and financial barriers to larger-scale reconstruction.

Successfully reimagining the refugee response will require more strategic engagement with private sector and development actors to make the refugee response less costly to donors, more economically sustainable for all actors, and of true benefit to host communities. Without a surge of engagement from new actors—and soon—ongoing aid cuts risk destabilizing the broader Levant.

Gulf states have a critical role to play, even as they recover from the war with Iran. Prior to the conflict, they had expressed interest in playing a leading role in the Levant's stabilization, and states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have been working in partnership to provide more strategic support to Lebanon and Syria. This cooperation must continue and expand. Even as recovery from the war with Iran will likely drive Gulf states to prioritize



Even as recovery from the war with Iran will likely drive Gulf states to prioritize domestic spending, these regional powers retain a unique ability to stabilize the wider region and create longer-lasting economic benefits, if they step up on the refugee response.

domestic spending, these regional powers retain a unique ability to stabilize the wider region and create longer-lasting economic benefits, if they step up on the refugee response. The Gulf states are well placed to support a more sustainable strategy for refugee self-reliance, which can prompt returns to Syria, economic stability within the region, and even deepen economic integration within the Levant. To achieve this potential, the Gulf states must partner with the United States and European states and, together, provide support to traditional actors in the humanitarian response to help bridge to the new approach and, most importantly, to ensure that the most vulnerable are not left behind.

AID CUTS

Western aid actors dramatically reduced their foreign assistance in 2025, threatening the foundations of a global aid architecture that has existed since the 1960s.¹⁶³ From 2024 to 2025, the United States reduced its humanitarian spending from \$14.1 billion to \$4.0 billion, according to data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' Financial Tracking Service.¹⁶⁴ But it is not just the world's largest donor that has been cutting its budget.

European donor countries are increasing their defense spending due to greater geopolitical instability and the United States' pressure for them to shoulder more of the burden of defense, leaving less funding available for humanitarian aid. Alongside U.S. humanitarian cuts of 71 percent, for example, Germany and the United Kingdom reduced their humanitarian contributions by 57 percent and 17 percent, respectively, between 2024 and 2025.¹⁶⁵

Aid cuts from Western donors have hit the refugee response hard. The UNHCR received funding for less than 38 percent of its total budget in 2025, consequently cutting its workforce by 30 percent, and either consolidating or reducing its presence in 185 locations around the world.¹⁶⁶ The Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)—a joint UNHCR–UN Development Programme platform designed to facilitate humanitarian



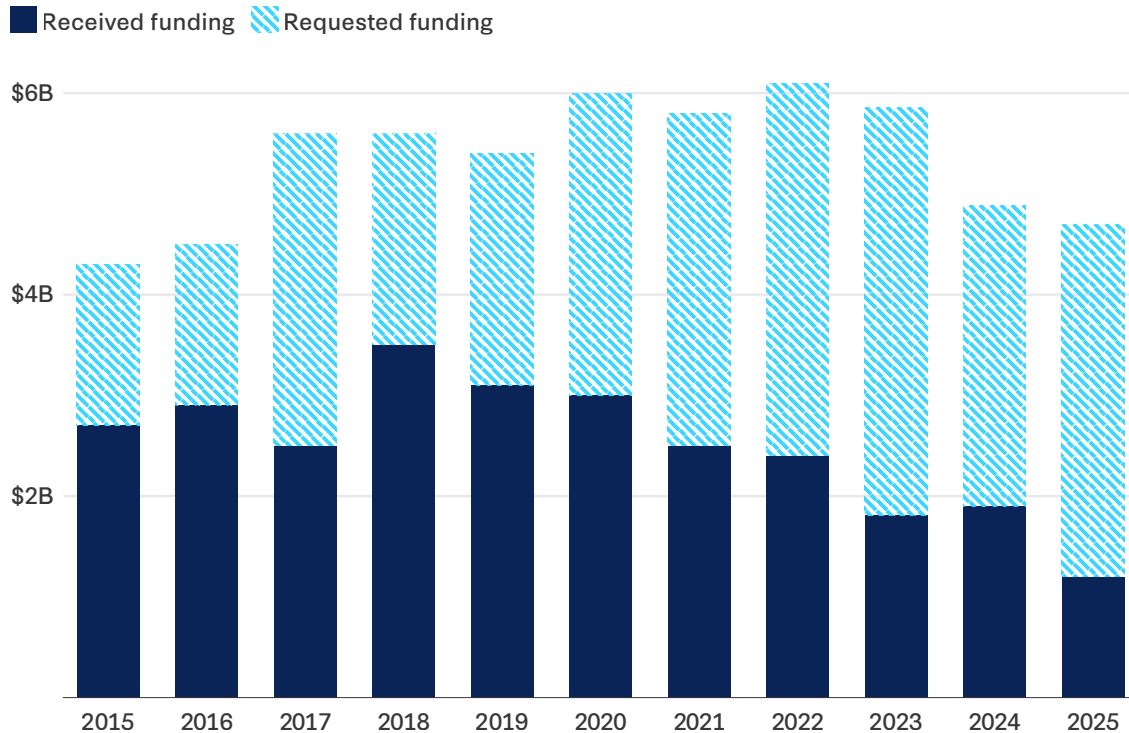
A worker removes the U.S. Agency for International Development sign on its headquarters on February 7, 2025, in Washington, D.C.

 Kayla Bartkowski/Getty Images

and development efforts—received just 26 percent of its requested funding in 2025, even while at least 3.7 million Syrian refugees remained in countries neighboring Syria.¹⁶⁷

Aid cuts are jeopardizing refugees' security and dignity globally and reversing some of the refugee response's successes of the past decade in the Middle East in particular. Budget cuts have meant that aid organizations are prioritizing life-saving interventions for the most vulnerable over efforts to enhance refugees' self-reliance more generally. The UNHCR reduced cash assistance for Syrian refugees in Jordan from \$61.5 million in 2024 to less than \$38 million in 2025, focusing instead on "access to critical healthcare for those with serious medical conditions, protection for women and children facing violence and abuse, and shelter and basic needs... for the most vulnerable families."¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile, in Lebanon, WFP cash assistance to Syrians was reduced by 59 percent in

3RP (Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan) funding trends



Source: UNHCR, "3RP Strategic Overview 2025: Summary Document," March 16, 2025, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/115171>; and data for "Total Registered Syrian Refugees," Syria Regional Refugee Response Operational Data Portal, as of August 20, 2026, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

2025.¹⁶⁹ At the same time, dramatic cuts to WFP funding for operations within Syria deterred refugee returns.¹⁷⁰ As a result, even more refugees are resorting to negative coping mechanisms, including rising debt, child labor, untreated illnesses, and school dropouts.¹⁷¹

Aid cuts have also revealed that some of donors' reform wins were not permanent. After the World Bank's 2016 work permit program ended in 2024, for example, the Jordanian government made drastic changes to the system for Syrians, reversing many of the earlier concessions. The post-2024 changes hiked annual work permit fees from roughly \$14 to \$700, as well as increasing mandatory national social insurance contributions.¹⁷² The government's reforms undercut

the promise of the Global Concessional Financing Facility as an instrument to achieve longer-term policy reforms to increase refugees' labor market inclusion.

THE POTENTIAL OF THE GULF

In contrast to Western donors, Gulf donors have stepped up their foreign aid. Qatar has more than quadrupled its humanitarian aid contributions, from \$552 million in 2024 to \$2.11 billion in 2025, while the UAE increased its contributions by 45 percent, from \$1.25 billion to \$1.81 billion over the period.¹⁷³ Just prior to the war with Iran, Gulf states had expressed an interest in leading efforts to stabilize the Levant, and

supporting refugees is one pillar of this strategy.¹⁷⁴ Qatar and the UAE had begun to enact the strategy before conflict broke out in Iran. It remains to be seen whether they will seize the opportunity to use their unique leverage to shape the refugee crisis toward self-reliance and inclusion after it.

The Syrian refugee crisis marked a turning point for Arab Gulf donors. Although they refused to allow formal refugee resettlement in their own countries, they did increase their aid contributions considerably and organized major international fundraising events for the response.¹⁷⁵ While Gulf states provided some support to the multilateral UN-led response, they channeled most of their support through their own state institutions, including supporting networks of local organizations

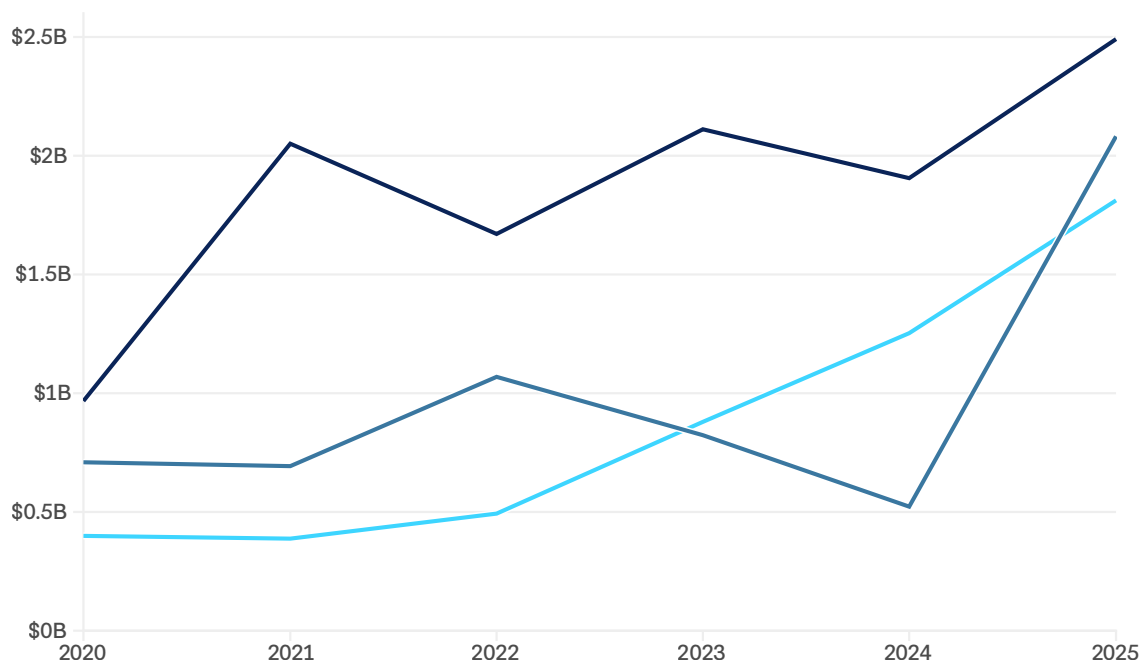
operating in host countries.¹⁷⁶ Gulf donors streamlined the aid process as well. As a result, some aid workers from refugee-hosting countries preferred working with Gulf donors over the United Nations, citing the latter's cumbersome bureaucratic processes and Gulf donors' ability to provide funds rapidly for priority areas.¹⁷⁷

The Gulf donors strategically deployed their resources. For example, some interventions were designed to highlight differences between Arab and Western aid projects. In 2013, the UAE's Red Crescent opened the Mrajeeb Al Fhood camp in Jordan to relieve pressure on the Zaatari camp. Al Fhood gained the nickname "the five-star camp" due to the high quality of its services, including electricity, hot water, streetlights, and three hot meals per day.¹⁷⁸

Figure 6: Arab Gulf States Increase Their Aid Budgets

Annual humanitarian contributions

■ Saudi Arabia ■ United Arab Emirates ■ Qatar



Source: "Humanitarian Aid Contributions," Financial Tracking Service, UN OCHA Services, accessed September 1, 2026, <https://fts.unocha.org/>.

The camp's establishment and conditions received substantial publicity, positively contributing to the UAE's reputation as a humanitarian donor. Moreover, the Al Fhood camp's establishment was portrayed as an explicit alternative to the UN-led system, demonstrating the UAE's financial generosity and high standards. One U.S. diplomat in Amman stated that Gulf donors considered the United Nations to be wasteful and sought to demonstrate the power of direct interventions.¹⁷⁹ Despite such reservations, Gulf donors have delivered support to UN agencies when Western donors have not. For example, in 2023, a WFP press release described a contribution from the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief) as arriving "just in the nick of time to avert imminent further cuts in food assistance" to Syrian refugees in Jordan.¹⁸⁰

Gulf donors possess several advantages over Western donors when it comes to supporting refugees in host countries throughout the Middle East. First, Gulf donors have more political sway and

trust with host governments because of linguistic and religious affinities. Moreover, lacking the historical baggage of Western states, Gulf states are not seen as having a colonial mindset. They are also better placed to support longer-term interventions, including market systems development, as they are not beholden to election cycles by needing to show their electorates quantifiable results of foreign aid. As discussed above, longer-term approaches have greater potential to transform the economies of refugee-hosting states. Gulf states also have recent experience transforming their own economies, which they can bring to bear in refugee-hosting states. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has embarked on an ambitious plan to diversify away from oil revenues and to move away from state-centric economic models. These strategies have included supporting private sector growth, boosting entrepreneurship, and creating jobs.¹⁸¹

Gulf states have already demonstrated that they are willing to wield their leverage.

They are no longer prepared to provide aid to merely paper over issues that require reform. For example, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly stated that it will only provide Lebanon with large-scale assistance on the condition that the latter's government implements necessary economic and political reforms.¹⁸² At times, Gulf states have used their leverage to push for refugees' right to work, although such efforts are rarely reported. As mentioned previously, one



Relief workers unload boxes of medical aid provided by Qatar at Damascus International Airport in Damascus, Syria.

Saudi-based development bank convinced the Lebanese Ministry of Labor to issue work permits for Syrians after the United Nations had failed to do so in 2022.¹⁸³

Hiring Syrian refugees could advance Gulf states' economic diversification agendas. In particular, Saudi Arabia is trying to bolster its private sector and cannot find sufficient human capital domestically. Syrian refugees offer a possible solution. An executive of a Jordanian company said "before, the Gulf as a whole was an opportunity for Jordanians to work. There are now 20 times the opportunities in Saudi Arabia compared to the rest of the Gulf."¹⁸⁴ One UN official stated that Saudi companies do not care what nationality of workers they hire, they just need skills and experience.¹⁸⁵ Such employment opportunities provide Syrians with important streams of income and facilitate the flow of remittances to their relatives, benefiting the larger displaced population as well as the individual.

Saudi companies are beginning to open offices in Jordan and elsewhere in the region to take advantage of cheaper, skilled workers. These companies are generally open to hiring Syrian refugees, but since Syrians earn the same salary as Jordanians and their employment requires approval from the Jordanian government, Jordanians remain more desirable.¹⁸⁶

Expanding opportunities for Syrians and host communities to work for Gulf companies would be a win-win solution. It advances Gulf states' own economic interests, while simultaneously boosting the economies of refugee-hosting states and promoting stability in the Levant. These

efforts could also expand to within Syria to facilitate sustainable refugee return.

RETURNING TO SYRIA

Since Syrian rebels toppled Assad in a lightning offensive in December 2024, more than 1.3 million Syrians have returned home from countries of asylum in the Middle East and beyond.¹⁸⁷ Fear of political persecution under Assad had consistently been one of the primary obstacles to refugee return.¹⁸⁸ Yet, the initial euphoria after Assad's fall made way for a more sobering reality.¹⁸⁹ Millions of Syrians who had been kept on subsistence-level aid were not prepared to take on the financial burden of returning to Syria. Moreover, the new Syrian government was not prepared to take on the burden of returning refugees.

Despite Assad's removal, significant obstacles remain to refugee return to Syria. The primary barrier cited by Syrian refugees across all host countries in the Middle East is the lack of adequate housing in Syria.¹⁹⁰ More than a million homes were destroyed in Syria over the course of the civil war, and reconstruction is slow and uneven.¹⁹¹ In July 2026, the International Rescue Committee surveyed 425 returnees and found that 71 percent of them resided in damaged housing.¹⁹² A lack of skilled labor able to conduct reconstruction has stymied reconstruction in particular. In late 2025, a Syrian aid worker reported that daily wages for skilled construction workers had reached triple what government officials made.¹⁹³ Without an influx of skilled labor, reconstruction will remain slow.

After housing shortages, refugees cite limited access to employment and livelihoods as the second-greatest barrier.¹⁹⁴ Although sanctions have been lifted and international actors have begun to sign multi-billion-dollar investment deals in Syria, those efforts have not yet translated into sufficient job opportunities for returning refugees. Most of the international investment will not materialize until Syria's banking sector recovers and the stigma associated with Syria that is prevalent among international banking officials dissipates.¹⁹⁵ Marking a step toward removing the stigma, in July 2026, President Trump announced his intention to rescind Syria's designation as a "state sponsor of terrorism," which had dissuaded international actors from investing.¹⁹⁶ Although diaspora investors are leading the charge to support business in Syria, their support to date has been uncoordinated and small-scale.¹⁹⁷

Ongoing insecurity in Syria also continues to deter returns. Bouts of violence in coastal regions, Sweida in the south, and northeast Syria demonstrate the fragility of Syria's transition. In May 2026, the Jordanian army struck drugs and weapons storage sites in southern Syria.¹⁹⁸ Meanwhile, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from eastern Syria and the reported escape of 15,000–20,000 detainees in camps for ISIS members and their relatives have stoked fears of an ISIS resurgence.¹⁹⁹

These factors have depressed Syrian refugees' hope for return. The most recent survey of Syrian refugees, published in April 2026, saw a decline in the number intending to return in the next 12 months—from 27 percent in January 2025 to 14 percent in December 2025.²⁰⁰ While this decline is partly attributable to the fact that some refugees who stated that they intended to return in fact did so, it also demonstrates that refugees' decisionmaking evolves and adapts to conditions in Syria and host countries. Moreover, intention surveys are not perfect predictors of returns. Two-thirds of the Syrian refugees who returned between June and December 2025 had previously reported that they did not intend to return within the next 12 months.²⁰¹

Neighboring host countries have not embarked on large-scale campaigns of forced return. In part, this is due to international pressure to maintain the



A destroyed building in Damascus, Syria, in November 2025.

principle of non-refoulement, which forbids governments from expelling asylum seekers and refugees to a territory where they face real threats. But in Türkiye, this reticence also reflects a tacit acknowledgment that Syrian refugees play an integral role in their own domestic economies. In April 2025, the Turkish Ministry of Labor conducted a study into how the mass return of Syrians could affect Turkey's economy.²⁰² Subsequently, in June 2026, the government announced that it would exempt Syrians under temporary protection from obtaining work permits, indicating the critical role they play in the economy.²⁰³

Some Syrians returned due to escalating conflict in host countries. Following the resumption of conflict between Israel and Lebanon on March 2, 2026, for example, more than 50,000 Syrians returned over the course of the month, up from just 490 the month prior.²⁰⁴

Syrians who have not returned face growing economic vulnerability in multiple host countries. As of August 2026, 3.9 million Syrians continue to live in neighboring countries.²⁰⁵ Many refugees with more stable incomes have already returned, leaving behind higher concentrations of refugees who depend on irregular or precarious work, even as the overall number of refugees decreases.²⁰⁶ More than half of refugee households continue to rely on humanitarian assistance to close essential gaps, and aid groups are slashing the services they provide.²⁰⁷ These vulnerabilities deter returns, which helps explain the falling number of refugees who report intending to return in the next 12 months. Yet, with



With poorer refugees being left behind and trying to survive with less aid, the burden on host communities is growing.

poorer refugees being left behind and trying to survive with less aid, the burden on host communities is growing.

The ripple effects of the war with Iran have exacerbated these burdens, but the war also created unprecedented opportunities to rethink the role refugees can play in regional integration and stabilization.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR WITH IRAN

The war with Iran has compounded challenges throughout the Levant but has also prompted a reimagining of the regional role that Syria can play. The combination of worsening humanitarian conditions and the emerging potential for Syria to reconnect the region reinforces the imperative of refugee self-reliance.

The war has exacerbated humanitarian conditions for vulnerable communities all over the Middle East. The disruption of maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz and the closure of airspace has increased fuel and food costs. These

challenges have affected communities that depend on aid, as global aid operations have become slower and more expensive. The crisis has forced UN agencies to divert aid shipments across land from the UN humanitarian hub in Dubai.²⁰⁸

The war has also prompted new waves of displacement. In addition to an estimated 3.2 million Iranians temporarily displaced since the beginning of Israeli and U.S. strikes on February 28, 2026, Israel's incursion into southern Lebanon has displaced more than 1.1 million people.²⁰⁹ These displacements have reduced the focus on Syrian refugees and increased competition for dwindling aid resources. Violence has also accelerated forced refugee returns to Syria, even without host government pressure. From March 2 to May 31, 2026, Syrian authorities estimate that 444,389 Syrians crossed from Lebanon into Syria, with many refugees returning under duress to flee the escalating conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.²¹⁰ These returns added more strain on Syria's public services and housing stock, as many refugees have no homes to return to. For these reasons, forced returns are generally less sustainable as they are not the result of a conscious plan by a refugee household to return.

The Iran conflict has also created new obstacles to voluntary refugee returns. First, increased transportation and food costs, and the reduced availability of aid, have increased the economic burden of return. Second, broader instability in the region has threatened to imperil Syria's economic recovery. With no large-scale international reconstruction aid expected

in Syria, the Syrian government is relying on an investment-led recovery strategy, but investment has proven slow. The risk of renewed conflict in Syria and neighboring states deters international investors from committing to Syria.

In addition, the war has jeopardized commitments Arab Gulf states have made to invest in Syria. Iran's attacks have not only destroyed critical infrastructure in the Arabian Peninsula, including oil and gas production facilities, but have also revealed U.S. security guarantees to be insufficient. The UAE has faced the most attacks, being targeted by 2,265 drones, 29 cruise missiles, and 551 ballistic missiles between February 28 and May 10, 2026.²¹¹ The economic consequences could be most severe for Qatar, however, which experienced the most extensive destruction of energy facilities and, moreover, was unable to export liquefied natural gas (LNG) through the Strait of Hormuz for months. A March attack on the Ras Laffan LNG facility damaged 17 percent of Qatar's production capacity, with full recovery expected to take three to five years.²¹² In May 2026, a senior Qatari official said that "all aid projects are frozen" and that Qatar could no longer afford to invest abroad to advance "political goals" and must focus on return on investment.²¹³ Although the war has had a less detrimental effect on Saudi Arabia's economy than on those of its neighbors, it is accelerating the government's strategy of deprioritizing mega projects and other loss-making projects in favor of investments that advance resilience and boost domestic economic activity.²¹⁴ As a result, Arab Gulf governments will likely increasingly divert their economic resources away from certain international

investments and toward domestic recovery and their own defensive capabilities.

SYRIA'S NEW GEOECONOMIC ROLE

The war with Iran has fundamentally changed the geoeconomic reality in the Middle East. Arab Gulf states know that Iran retains the ability—and the will—to obstruct maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, and so many of them are advancing strategies to minimize their reliance on the passage. Saudi Arabia and the UAE can both divert exports to alternative ports outside the Persian Gulf, although neither pathway can match the capacity of Gulf-based ports. Other states, such as Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, have no alternative ports. As a result, Arab Gulf states are increasingly looking to overland routes through the Levant to the Mediterranean, creating a new opportunity for Syria to emerge as a key node of connectivity in the Middle East.

The Syrian government is keen to seize on its new geoeconomic role. In April 2026, President Ahmed al-Sharaa argued that Syria can be “a bridge to security” and “the alternative and secure artery connecting Central Asia and the Gulf to the heart of the European continent” instead of “an arena for others’ conflicts.”²¹⁵ This pitch piqued global leaders’ attention. Syria’s finance minister attended a G7 meeting in May and the French government invited al-Sharaa to participate in the G7 leaders’ summit in France in mid-June, though he did not ultimately attend.²¹⁶

The Syrian government has taken several significant steps to facilitate increased trade with its neighbors. In April 2026, Syria reopened two border crossings with Iraq—the Tanf-al-Waleed and the Yaroubiyah-Rabia crossings—which has facilitated trade and oil transportation between the two countries.²¹⁷ By June, Iraq had exported a record high of more than 600,000 tons of fuel oil from Syria’s Baniyas port as a result.²¹⁸

Syria also demonstrated its potential as a land bridge for trade between Turkey and Gulf states—in May, a transit convoy from Turkey crossed through Syria to Iraq for the first time.²¹⁹

In tandem, the Syrian government has made several moves to increase connectivity with Jordan. In April 2026, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey signed an agreement to establish an integrated regional transport system. The three countries agreed to enhance rail connectivity, harmonize



Trucks carrying fuel wait at the entrance of Baniyas Port in Syria in May of 2026.

transit and trade procedures, and improve supply chain efficiency.²²⁰ These moves are intended to demonstrate the Levant's role as a logistics hub that can link regional and global markets. Turkey and Saudi Arabia have also signed agreements to explore the revival of the historic Hejaz railway, running from Turkey, through Syria and Jordan, to the Arabian Peninsula.²²¹ The project includes fiber-optic networks and seeks to advance telecommunications and digital connectivity in tandem. Yet, serious challenges remain to making this vision a reality. Syria remains fragile, with parts of the country still outside of the government's control, under a persistent threat from ISIS, and subject to ongoing Israeli attacks. Overland infrastructure—including roads and railways—is vulnerable to sabotage. The project also relies on continued political alignment between the participating states, even as a new political order in the region has yet to solidify.²²²

THE LATENT POTENTIAL OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

Syrian refugees are a strategic asset for Syria's connectivity ambitions. They are already embedded in the countries and regions that Syria wants to connect with: Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, the Gulf, and Europe. Therefore, they have the potential to serve as economic connectors, not just as people to be returned to Syria. These refugees can become active participants in rebuilding Syria, from abroad while residing in host countries and also upon returning. Unlocking the potential of the Syrian refugees involves four interrelated pathways.

First, Syrian refugees can directly participate in building new infrastructure to connect the region. Many Syrians have experience working in construction, trucking, and heavy machinery in host countries, whether formally or informally and, as such, they represent a ready-made workforce. International actors are already delivering related skills-based training to align with opportunities in Syria.²²³ Aid organizations should expand these efforts in partnership with private sector actors to develop the specific skills that are needed for reconstruction.



Refugees can become active participants in rebuilding Syria, from abroad while residing in host countries and also upon returning.

Second, Syrian refugees and the broader Syrian diaspora can act as critical sources of investment to fund reconstruction and connectivity. Both groups already funnel billions of dollars into Syria each year. The governor of the Central Bank of Syria estimated that Syrians abroad sent more than \$4 billion to the country in the year after Assad's ouster.²²⁴ To capitalize on this potential, the Syrian government and its international partners must accelerate efforts to facilitate safe investments in businesses, housing, transportation, and digital services.

Third, as new trade corridors open, refugee entrepreneurs are well placed to seize new business opportunities. During their displacement, Syrians have developed business networks across borders, relevant language skills, and understandings of local markets. For example, Syrian traders in Gaziantep—a large city in south-central Turkey—could source necessary goods for their businesses from Syria, while those in Jordan could help revive overland export routes from southern Syria to the Gulf. At the moment, these relationships are emerging organically, but setting up dedicated business councils in key cities in Syria and neighboring countries would help match refugee-owned firms abroad with domestic Syrian firms. To maximize this potential, regional governments must create clear licensing processes and commercial rules to facilitate broad and equal access to these opportunities.

Finally, the continued presence of Syrians in neighboring countries and further afield can itself serve as a key asset for Syria's connectivity goals. The process discussed here is not just about facilitating returns. Some Syrians may not want to return—they have created businesses, acquired skills, built lives, and in some cases gained citizenship abroad and would prefer to stay. Yet, these Syrians can also contribute to the recovery and connectivity of their country. They can spread awareness to other potential investors about business opportunities in Syria, leveraging their language skills, knowledge of the local context, and personal ties. The Syrian government should open trade offices in its embassies in countries that host large numbers of refugees and seek to partner

with refugees to spread awareness of these opportunities within the host countries.

THE WAY FORWARD

For Syria to emerge as a regional hub of connectivity, it requires investments in logistics, transportation, construction, renewables, manufacturing, and digital services. And to leverage refugees' potential in realizing this vision, they must be consciously integrated into reconstruction strategies. Too often, special economic initiatives benefit elites but exclude local populations. Alongside flagship infrastructure projects, Gulf states should provide support to SMEs and municipalities to ensure that larger initiatives generate



The dramatically altered landscape in the Middle East in 2026 has created a new opening for a coalition of stakeholders to come together and exert their leverage to push host countries to implement the necessary reforms.

employment opportunities. This strategy would be a way of cutting down silos between geoeconomic strategies and the humanitarian response.

Refugees need to be able to achieve genuine self-reliance to participate in these efforts, which will require legal and financial reforms. Many of these reforms comprise refugee inclusion measures that the Western-led refugee response failed to achieve in the first decade-plus of the Syrian refugee crisis. However, the dramatically altered landscape in the Middle East in 2026 has created a new opening for a coalition of stakeholders to come together and exert their leverage to push host countries to implement the necessary reforms.

Arab Gulf state governments, private sector leaders, Western governments, and aid organizations should work together to reimagine the 3RP (Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan), particularly in terms of greater refugee inclusion and self-reliance, and secure host country buy-in for this vision. This process will require a combination of political pressure and financial incentives to convince host countries of the necessity of granting refugees economic inclusion.

A key feature of the reimagined 3RP must be providing refugees with access to formal labor markets in host countries so that they can benefit from private sector opportunities. With many Syrians having already returned home, host countries are likely to be more willing to grant those that remain labor rights, as remaining refugees represent a significantly smaller portion of their populations than previously. With

labor rights in place, Gulf- and private sector-backed infrastructure projects should include hiring targets, vocational pipelines, and financing mechanisms to integrate displaced Syrians into emerging industries.

Without the ability to acquire legal documents, access to formal labor markets will not be enough for refugees to achieve their potential. As a result, international actors will need to spearhead efforts to help Syrian refugees obtain legal documents. Most refugees do not have civil documentation, educational certificates, or property records. Resolving these issues would not only facilitate return but also enable these individuals to access formal employment, open businesses, secure loans, cross borders, and participate in regional supply chains. Relatedly, refugees require greater financial inclusion. Many are excluded from banking systems and formal finance, often because of their lack of formal documentation. Refugees need reforms to be able to open accounts, transfer remittances, access credit, and launch businesses.

Regional governments should also explore efforts to facilitate mobility within the Levant. For Syrians to connect these markets, they need to be able to move between them. Refugees have commercial networks, language skills, and professional relationships across states, which enable them to play these roles. Facilitating geographic mobility would reframe return, transforming it from a one-time, irreversible event to a continuous feedback loop. Syrian refugees thus can become the connective tissue between economies.

This investment-led strategy must not overlook the need for continued humanitarian assistance for groups of refugees who could be excluded from this approach, particularly early in the transition—for example, women-led households, individuals with disabilities, the elderly, and unaccompanied minors. Ideally, host countries would fold these groups into national systems that can provide for them. It is incumbent on donor governments to provide sufficient support to continue to meet their needs so that the particularly vulnerable are not left behind.



ED RAM via Getty Images

CONCLUSION

For more than a decade, the Syrian refugee response preserved lives but failed to give most refugees a credible path toward autonomy. Donors and host governments repeatedly deferred politically difficult decisions on work, mobility, documentation, and economic inclusion in favor of actions that met immediate needs but failed to resolve underlying causes. In doing so, they allowed an emergency response to harden into an expensive system of care and maintenance that left refugees dependent on shrinking aid budgets and host countries carrying an increasingly unsustainable burden.

The consequences of those early choices cannot be fully reversed, but the political and economic transformations now underway in the Middle East have created a new opening for significant improvement. Syria's transition, growing Gulf engagement in the Levant,

and rising interest in regional trade and transport links have changed the context in which refugee policy is made. Syrian displacement is increasingly connected to the prospects for Syria's recovery, the stability of neighboring states, and the region's wider economic integration.

This moment represents a new golden hour for refugee response. The task is not simply to encourage refugees to return, nor to sustain them indefinitely in neighboring countries. It is to give Syrians the means to make durable choices about their futures, to empower them to be self-reliant. Refugees who can work legally, move safely, secure documentation, build savings, and develop relevant skills will be better positioned whether they remain in host countries, return to Syria, or move between regional markets. Self-reliance is not an alternative to voluntary return. Properly designed, self-reliance is one of the foundations for successful return. Syria's future depends on entrepreneurship, access to finance, labor market matching, skills formation, SME growth, value chain development, and domestic and regional investment. Self-reliant Syrians are the key to success in all those sectors.

Realizing this opportunity will require policymakers to overcome the political constraints that undermined earlier initiatives. Host governments will need incentives to expand refugees' economic rights. Gulf states can bring investment, political leverage, and connections to emerging regional industries. Western governments and multilateral institutions can contribute technical expertise, development finance, and experience in



Refugees who can work legally, move safely, secure documentation, build savings, and develop relevant skills will be better positioned whether they remain in host countries, return to Syria, or move between regional markets.

refugee governance. The private sector can connect Syrians to economic activity that is more sustainable than short-term aid programs. Crucially, none of these actors can succeed alone and cooperation will be essential.

An investment-led approach must also recognize its limits. Not every refugee will be able to achieve economic self-reliance, and greater attention to labor markets must not become a pretext for abandoning humanitarian responsibilities. Older people, people with disabilities, women-led households, children, and others unable to benefit readily from employment opportunities will continue to require protection and support. A more sustainable refugee response should reduce unnecessary dependency while preserving assistance for those who need it.

The central lesson from Jordan is that refugee outcomes are shaped not only by the amount of aid provided, but also by the political choices that determine what refugees are permitted to do, particularly early in the crisis. International actors spent billions of dollars managing the consequences of exclusion while devoting too little political capital to changing the policies that produced dependency. Repeating that model would leave refugees poorer, host countries more fragile, and Syria less prepared for recovery.

Syrians are much more than recipients of assistance or prospective returnees. They are workers, entrepreneurs, investors, consumers, innovators, and members of commercial and social networks that span the region and the globe. Whether their potential is lost or mobilized will help determine not only the future of Syrian displacement, but also the economic and political future of the Levant and the broader Middle East. The opportunity is real, but it will not remain open indefinitely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To unlock the potential of Syrians, Arab Gulf states should:

1. Lead the reimagination of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP).
 - Place greater emphasis on economic inclusion, labor rights, and private sector engagement.
 - Mainstream a market systems development approach into the plan to tackle host countries' structural economic challenges and to promote the creation of sustainable jobs.
2. Leverage political capital to advance refugees' ability to be self-reliant.
 - Deploy political leverage systematically and explicitly to make financial support to refugee-hosting countries in the Middle East contingent on policy reforms that facilitate refugee self-reliance, particularly granting refugees formal work rights.
3. Ensure that the benefits of reconstruction financing to Syria are distributed widely and not captured by elites.
 - Alongside funding for flagship infrastructure, support the rehabilitation of basic services to bolster municipalities' capacity, facilitate local recovery, and enable sustainable refugee return.
 - Provide dedicated support to SMEs in Syria to stimulate private sector activity and generate broader employment opportunities for Syrians and returning refugees.
4. Connect refugee policy to the Strait of Hormuz workaround strategy.
 - Proactively integrate refugees into projects to develop overland trade routes through the Levant that circumvent the Strait of Hormuz.
 - Include hiring targets, vocational pipelines, and financing mechanisms within flagship projects that benefit Syrian refugees, rather than treating the refugee issue as distinct to infrastructure financing.

5. Collaborate with the Syrian government to open trade offices and business councils in neighboring countries.
 - Support the creation of business councils in cities such as Amman, Beirut, and Gaziantep to match refugee-owned firms with domestic Syrian firms, capitalizing on refugees' cross-border networks and language skills.
6. Integrate refugees into domestic economic diversification agendas.
 - Turn to refugees for skilled labor to fuel efforts to reduce reliance on hydrocarbon revenues.
 - Encourage Gulf embassies in the Levant to develop new advertisement strategies to ensure that refugees and members of host countries are aware of job openings in companies based in the Gulf that cannot be filled with nationals.

The United States and other Western donor governments should:

1. Use the current inflection point of the fall of Assad, aid cuts, and the war with Iran to reimagine the Syrian refugee response.
 - Spend political capital on ensuring that humanitarian and development support to refugee-hosting governments is contingent on refugees' labor rights, freedom of movement, and access to legal documentation.
 - Tie cash assistance programs to refugees and host communities explicitly to these legal reforms.
2. Prioritize efforts to encourage investment and stimulate private sector activity.
 - Provide clear information to financial institutions about the lifting of sanctions on Syria and what actions are now permissible.
 - Work with financial institutions and their partners to address de-risking.
3. Convene a private sector summit for the Middle East, modeled on the 2023 Paris summit to support Ukrainian refugees.
 - This summit should include substantial representation from Gulf-connected companies and regional multinationals.

4. Increase coordination with Gulf states rather than working in parallel.
 - Capitalize on the comparative advantages that Western governments have in multilateral coordination, technical expertise in refugee governance, and development finance institutions to complement Gulf states' investment-led strategies.
5. Explore reforms to the Global Concessional Financing Facility to prevent policy reversals.
 - Redesign financial tools so that policy reforms become durable rather than being contingent on ongoing disbursements that can be reversed when funding lapses.
6. Avoid funding supply-side vocational training programs for refugees and host communities.
 - Prioritize longer-term, demand-side approaches to job creation in line with a market systems development approach.
 - Provide multiyear funding to local partners to facilitate this longer-term approach.
7. Avoid pressuring implementing partners to inflate beneficiary counts.
 - Collaborate with partners to develop metrics that demonstrate the true quality and sustainability of interventions.
8. Provide funding for humanitarian actors that capitalizes on their unique value proposition.
 - Encourage them to accept a more defined, bounded role in the response that includes a focus on protection mandates, providing support for the most vulnerable refugees, raising attention to the crisis, and fundraising.

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