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Weighed down by economic woes, Syrian refugees head home from Jordan

‘We’ve gotten tired of this life, and we’ve lost hope.’

Madeline Edwards

Amman-based freelance journalist covering Syria

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Syrian journalist based in Amman



In her Amman apartment, Umm Omran scrolls through a WhatsApp chat with relatives in Syria. (Madeline Edwards/TNH)

Rahaf* and Qassem lay out their plans to return to Syria as their five-year-old daughter plays with her toys in their small apartment in the Jordanian capital, Amman.

It is early October, six years after they fled their home in Damascus, and the couple have decided it's time to give up trying to make a life for themselves in Jordan.

Last year, 51-year-old Qassem lost his job at a cleaning supplies factory when the facility shut down, and Rahaf's home business as a beautician is slow.

For months, the couple have resorted to borrowing money from friends to cover their 200 Jordanian dinar (\$282) monthly rent. They are three months overdue. "There's nobody else for us to borrow money from," explains Rahaf.

Weeks later, Qassem crossed the border and headed back to their old neighbourhood, joining an increasing tide of Syrian refugees who are going home, despite the dangers and a multitude of unknowns.

According to the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, 34,000 registered Syrian refugees have returned from Jordan since October 2018, when a key border crossing was reopened after years of closure. It's a fraction of the 650,000 registered Syrian refugees remaining in Jordan, but a dramatic jump from previous years, when annual returns hovered at around 7,000.

Syrian refugees from the other main host countries – Turkey and Lebanon – are making the trip too. UNHCR has monitored more than 209,000 voluntary refugee returns to Syria since 2016, but the actual figure is likely to be significantly higher.

Some Syrian refugees face political pressure to return and anti-refugee rhetoric, but that hasn't taken hold in Jordan.

Here, many refugees say they are simply fed up with years spent in a dead-end job market with a bleak economic future. The uptick appears to be driven more by the fact that Syrians who wish to go home can now – for the first time in three years – board a bus or a shared taxi from the border, which is about an hour and a half's drive north of Amman.

People like Rahaf and Qassem are pinning their hopes on picking up what is left of the lives they led before the war. Their Damascus house, which was damaged in the conflict, is near Qassem's old shop, where he used to sell basic groceries and cleaning supplies.

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Qassem is staying with relatives for now. But the family had a plan: if and when he gave the green light, Rahaf and their children would join him back in Damascus.

While she waited for his signal, Rahaf sold off what little furniture and other possessions they acquired in Jordan. "Honestly, we've gotten tired of this life, and we've lost hope," she said.

Money problems

Before he lost his job, Qassem endured years of verbal abuse in the workplace, and few clients made the trip to Rahaf's home.

When she tried to set up a salon elsewhere, their refugee status created bureaucratic hurdles the couple couldn't overcome. "I did go ask about paying rent for one shop, and they immediately told me no," Qassem said. "[The owners] wanted a Jordanian renter."

Their story echoes those of many other refugees who say they have found peace but little opportunity in Jordan.

Syrian refugees need a permit to work in Jordan – over 153,000 have been issued so far – but they are limited to working in a few industries in designated economic zones. Many others end up in low-paying jobs, and have long faced harsh economic conditions in Jordan.

Thousands of urban refugees earn a meagre living either on farms or construction sites, or find informal work as day labourers.

Abu Omran, who returned to Syria three months ago, fled Damascus with his family in 2013, and for a while was able to find occasional car mechanic jobs in Amman. Work eventually dried up, and he struggled to find ways to make money that did not require hard manual labour.

"He spent the past three years just sitting at home, with no job," recalled Abu Omran's wife, Umm Omran.

Speaking to The New Humanitarian in her Amman living room several months after her husband's departure, she was soon joined for coffee and cigarettes by her youngest son, 19-year-old Badr. Newly married, he wore a ring on one finger.

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Times were so hard for the family that Abu Omran left Jordan before he had a chance to attend the wedding, and Badr has also been contemplating a return to Syria – the country he left as a young teenager.

Badr works in a factory near Amman that produces cleaning products, but the pay is low. And although his older brother brings in a small salary from a pastry shop, it's getting harder and harder for the family to pull together their rent each month.

“I’m not returning because I think the situation in Syria is good. But you don’t enter into a difficult situation unless the one you’re currently in is even worse.”

Entering a void

While return may seem the best option for some, there are still more unknowns than knowns across the border in Syria.

President Bashar al-Assad's government forces control most of the country, but there are still [airstrikes in the rebel-held northwest](#), and the recent [Turkish invasion of the northeast](#) has raised new questions about the country's future.

“I’m not returning because I think the situation in Syria is good,” said Farah, a mother of three who spoke to TNH in September – about a month before she packed up her things to leave. “But you don’t enter into a difficult situation unless the one you’re currently in is even worse.”

In 2012, Farah and her husband left their home in the [Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp](#) on the outskirts of Damascus for Jordan, where she gave birth to her three children.

Her husband suffers from kidney stones, and the manual labour he has managed to pick up is just enough for them to pay for the rent of a shared house – crammed in with two other refugee families.

The vast majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan – including Farah and Abu Omran’s families – live in urban areas like Amman, rather than in the country’s three refugee camps. They are still eligible for aid, but Farah had decided by October that she was “no longer able to bear” the poverty in Amman, even though UN food vouchers had covered some of her expenses.

She took her three young children and crossed the border into Syria to stay with her mother, who lives in a southeastern suburb of Damascus. TNH has not been able to contact her since.

Farah’s husband stayed behind in Jordan, fearing arrest or forced military conscription by Syrian government authorities.

This has happened to other people who have gone back to Syria from Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, or other host countries. Despite promises to the contrary from the government, hundreds – and possibly thousands – of returnees have reportedly been detained.

“There are issues with what information is made available to refugees... about what is going to happen to them on the other side, in Syria.”

Lebanese authorities have also forcibly deported thousands of Syrian refugees, and Human Rights Watch says at least three of them were detained by Syrian authorities when they got back. It isn’t clear if any Syrians have faced the same fate returning from Jordan.

Sara Kayyali, a researcher for Human Rights Watch based in Jordan, told TNH she has yet to verify reports of disappearance, conscription, and detainment of returnees from Jordan.

“There are issues with what information is made available to refugees... about what is going to happen to them on the other side, in Syria,” said Kayyali. “Partially because people inside are too scared to talk about the conditions in government-held areas, and partially because the restrictions applied and the behaviour of the Syrian security forces is so arbitrary that it’s difficult to predict.”

Kayyali pointed to the 30 Jordanian citizens detained in Syria since the border opened a year ago – Amman said they entered for tourism and were arrested without reason – as a sign of what could be to come for Syrians.

“[If those threats] apply to Jordanians, then they’re most certainly going to be applied to Syrians, potentially on an even larger scale,” said Kayyali.

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There are other obstacles to return, or challenges for people who manage to get back, including destroyed homes and lost jobs. Healthcare and water provision is scattershot in certain parts of the country, while violence and war is ongoing in others.

Francesco Bert, a UNHCR spokesperson in Jordan, said the agency “does not facilitate returns, but offers support to refugees if they voluntarily decide to go home”.

Asked whether it is safe for refugees to go back to Syria, Bert said the agency “considers refugees’ decisions as the main guideposts”, but gives refugees considering or planning to return “information that might inform their decision-making”, to help ensure it is truly voluntary.

The waiting game

Despite the obstacles, more and more people are making the trip. But families often can’t travel back together.

For Rahaf, that meant packing her things and waiting, before finally joining her husband last weekend.

For Umm Omran, however, that means wondering if and when she will ever see her husband again.

The family had hoped that Abu Omran could find a job repairing cars again in Damascus, and if that didn’t work out at least he could live rent-free with his sister’s family.

But plans for his wife and sons to join him someday, once he had found his footing, now look increasingly unlikely.

“He hasn’t said yet if he regrets going back home,” said Umm Omran, who communicates regularly via WhatsApp with her husband and other family members who never left Syria. They live in government-controlled Damascus and don’t give away much in their chats for fear of retaliation by security forces, who they worry could be monitoring their communications.

What Umm Omran has managed to piece together isn't promising.

Her husband has yet to find a job in Damascus, and is beginning to feel like a burden at his sister's home. Their own house, where he and Umm Omran raised their sons, is bombed-out and needs extensive repairs before anyone can move back in.

For the time-being, Umm Omran has ruled out her own potential return to Syria, fearing her two sons would insist on joining her and end up being conscripted into the armed forces. So, for now, the family remains split in two.

"When I ask him how things are going, he just says, 'Thank God'. He says little else," said Umm Omran, scrolling through chats on her mobile phone. "I think he's upset about leaving us."

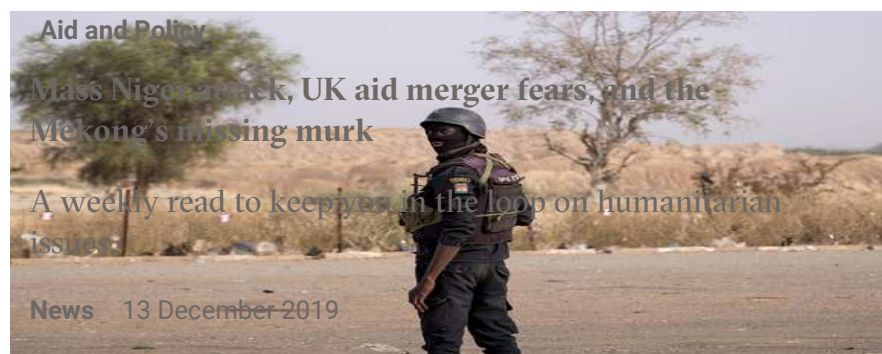
**The names of all Syrians have been changed to protect their identities.*

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