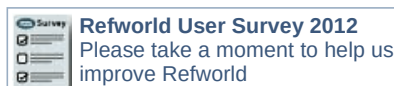


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Briefing: The mounting Syrian refugee crisis

Nearly a year and a half after the start of the Syrian uprising, tens of thousands of people have fled the country. Until recently, most found shelter in homes with friends, relatives and even strangers. But as the numbers increase, several neighbouring countries are opening new camps to accommodate them.

IRIN tallies the latest figures, humanitarian needs and political fallout of the mounting Syrian refugee crisis.

How many refugees are there?

From April to August, the number of Syrians registered with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq nearly quadrupled, from 40,000 to more than 155,000, with recent marked increases in Jordan and Iraq. About 75 percent are believed to be women and children.

Community-based organizations say there are many more who have not registered, either because they are afraid, they are far from the registration centres, or they do not see any benefit to doing so. UNHCR is currently [scaling up](#) its ability to register refugees.

The numbers have been a point of contention. The Jordanian government, for example, says 150,000 Syrians are on its territory, but observers question whether they are all refugees or if some are simply migrants or businessmen who regularly cross the border. In Lebanon, observers say the opposite, that the government is downplaying the numbers to avoid upsetting the unstable political balance in the country.

Syrians are increasingly seeking refuge beyond the region. Sources close to the Algerian Ministry of Interior have estimated that 12,000 Syrians have entered the country, with other estimates as high as 25,000. Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, reported that an average of 1,000 Syrian asylum seekers have arrived in Europe per month so far this year.

Syrian refugees in neighboring countries (registered or awaiting registration)			
	1 April 2012	19 July 2012	16 August 2012
JORDAN	7,000	36,450	46,898
LEBANON	12,900	32,486	46,672
TURKEY	16,500	42,682	61,450
IRAQ	2,240	8,000	14,129
Total	40,000	119,618	169,149

Source: UNHCR. Figures are based on estimates and thus may vary

What are the policies at the borders?

Since the beginning of the unrest in Syria, the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq have kept their borders open for Syrians, and according to UNHCR, refugees do not need visas whether they enter these countries through official or unofficial border crossings.

But the reality is a bit more complicated.

Fleeing Syrians have reported that the Syrian government has at times [refused to let them leave legally](#), forcing many of them to cross borders illegally.

Lebanese borders are open to refugees, but some Syrian refugees have complained of a lack of

protection once they reach Lebanon. On 1 August, the Lebanese newspaper the Daily Star [reported](#) the deportations of 14 anti-regime activists back to Syria on allegations they had committed theft, attacked the house of an army officer, insulted the military establishment and used forged documents.

[Mines](#) along the Turkish and Lebanese borders may also make it harder for Syrians enter those countries.

At the Rabi'a border crossing in northern Iraq, Syrian Kurds are automatically considered refugees, according to an order issued by the Kurdistan Council of Ministers, and are given documentation and humanitarian assistance by the Iraqi Kurdish authorities. But the al-Qa'im crossing further south has twice been closed by the Iraqi authorities, most recently on 13 August. Syrian Kurdish refugees have reported instances of asylum seekers being detained or turned back by Iraqi authorities. Some Syrians have also entered Iraq legally, mostly by air to Baghdad, and then gone underground when their visas expired.

Turkey's open border policy has been consistent. The closure of borders to commercial traffic has not affected access for refugees.

Where are the refugees staying?

Syrians who have fled to the Lebanese capital appear to be aided by personal networks and are unlikely to require additional assistance. But the majority of refugees are staying in private houses in the poorer areas of the country near the border, and some have sought refuge in public shelters like schools and mosques. Various UN aid agencies and NGOs are helping them.

Jordan's first official camp at Za'atari is now operational. At full capacity, its 9sqkm of desert land can host up to 130,000 refugees. But conditions there are difficult: tents are not adapted to the desert environment and more than 2,500 mobile homes are needed. Food, generators, coolers, water tanks, and waste disposal are lacking.

In Turkey, humanitarian conditions in seven refugee camps managed by the Turkish Red Crescent are comparatively better than those in neighbouring countries. But protests have occurred in several of the camps because of unreliable running water and poor sanitation. These conditions have reportedly improved, at least in Kilis camp in the south of the country.

In Iraq, UNHCR and the Iraq Red Crescent are setting up [a new camp in al-Qa'im](#). This is in addition to [Domiz camp](#) in Iraqi Kurdistan, where shelter, education and healthcare are provided to 2,500 Syrian Kurds. The pre-existing Palestinian refugee camp in al-Waleed is being refurbished to accommodate 300 Syrians. UNHCR is also planning to erect 200 tents in Al-Kasik area, 50km from the Rabi'a crossing. Medical staff and ambulances have been dispatched to several of the refugee sites.

Do they have freedom of movement?

Refugees in Turkey were previously confined to government-run border camps, but are now allowed to travel freely in Turkey. Most do not have the resources to leave the camps, however. Access to camps by non-refugees is limited and strictly regulated.

In Lebanon, Syrian refugees lack circulation permits. Previously, a Jordanian citizen could sponsor a refugee, allowing him or her to move freely in the country, but this system has recently changed, with the Jordanian government now limiting Syrian refugees to border locations.

What are the gaps in humanitarian coverage?

In Lebanon, most refugees are located in the north and in the eastern Beqa'a valley, two of the poorest regions of the country. There, one of the main humanitarian gaps is [education](#): the school enrolment rate among refugees remains extremely low, with less than 13 percent of refugee children attending primary school. Some school principals have refused to accept refugee students because it was unclear if the government would cover the costs.

The medical needs of the refugees are also a major concern for UNHCR. Lebanon's Higher Relief Council announced last month it would stop covering "any medical expenses for any wounded or other Syrian refugees in Lebanon". Donors from the Gulf have stepped in to close the gaps in primary healthcare, but secondary health care remains a challenge.

A joint needs assessment by the Jordanian Government and humanitarian agencies identified food, water and sanitation systems as major and increasing priority needs. The growing numbers of displaced Syrians living in communities have increased pressure on local capacities to provide basic public services.

In Iraq, gaps were mostly identified within the health sector, such as need for medicines. Household items, water networks/tanks, generators with fuel, tents, healthcare and cash, and, eventually, employment are also needed in locations set to receive Syrian refugees in Al-Qa'im and Al-Waleed.

At the Domiz camp, the Fayda Water Department continues to deliver potable water by tanker,

but as the camp expands, a more sustainable water system will be required.

Many refugees are concerned about safety; those in Jordan and Lebanon say they fear being hunted down by Syrian intelligence. Several incidents of attacks, kidnappings or intimidation of refugees by regime agents have been reported in recent months.

What about funding?

At the beginning of the crisis, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund [allocated](#) US\$9.7 million to UN agencies and NGOs to assist Syrians.

The Syria Regional Refugee Response Plan, revised in June to include the needs of 185,000 Syrian refugees anticipated by the year's end, is currently 40 percent funded, with \$193 million requested. The United States and the European Commission are the biggest donors.

Some priority projects in key sectors such as health, water and sanitation remain on hold due to the lack of funding, as Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos recently [pointed out](#).

What has been the political impact of the refugee crisis?

Of the four neighbouring countries, only Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention; Lebanon and Jordan refer to the Syrians as “guests” not “refugees”.

The refugees are a particularly sensitive issue in Lebanon, which has several pro-Syrian factions in parliament. The government has been averse to setting up refugee camps for the Syrians out of fear such camps would become volatile, as has been the case with the country's Palestinian refugee camps. Reports that rebels have used areas within Lebanon as staging grounds for attacks on Syrian forces further these anxieties.

Fears of spill-over violence can be found elsewhere, as well. According to the New York Times, the Jordanian authorities are more actively [restraining anti-regime Syrian activists](#) who have fled to Jordan, reflecting concerns about violence extending into the country.

In [Iraqi Kurdistan](#), some Syrian refugees are receiving [military training](#) from the Kurdistan Regional Government, causing alarm. The government contends the trained refugees would only be sent back to Syria if the fall of regime causes a security vacuum. Other refugees may sympathize with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), the militant separatist group, raising the possibility of inflaming tensions with Turkey.