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Permanently Temporary – Syrian Refugees in Jordan

Between pressure to return and blocked integration

Nadine Biehler and Amrei Meier

As Jordan demonstrates, international support and a willingness to host refugees are not enough to achieve durable solutions in protracted displacement situations. Despite comparatively favorable conditions, many Syrian refugees living there have no discernible long-term prospects. Instead, the interplay of Jordanian government interests and international donor priorities has created a system of limited participation for the refugees. It allows many Syrians to organize their precarious daily lives largely independently, but offers them neither substantial rights nor future prospects. These interim arrangements, which are internationally funded and geared toward temporary residence, have functioned for a long time. However, as aid funding declines and expectations of return grow, these arrangements are becoming increasingly fragile. For donors such as Germany, this raises the question of how support can be structured in a future where voluntary return is unrealistic for many, resettlement is rare, and local integration remains politically blocked.

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the subsequent political transition have put the future of Syrian refugees firmly back on the political agenda in the region's main host countries. In Jordan, this debate coincides with a refugee situation that long merited the classification "protracted." Since 2011, Jordan has granted protection to over 900,000 people who fled the Syrian civil war; as of September 2026 nearly 330,000 Syrians remain registered as refugees in Jordan, where they have now spent years in precarious social and economic conditions.

The Jordanian government cooperated with international donors to address the initial humanitarian emergency. Through the regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and the Jordan Response Plan (JRP), the United States, the European Union and its member states, and international financial institutions funded humanitarian aid as well as programs in the areas of education, municipal infrastructure, and economic self-reliance.

Jordan thus serves as a model for a more development- and solution-oriented approach to protracted displacement situations, as outlined in the Global Compact



on Refugees (GCR). It also demonstrates the limits of international support, even where there is a willingness to host, substantial donor funding, and institutionalized cooperation.

Why durable solutions are not working in Jordan

Fifteen years after the start of the Syrian crisis and almost ten years after the GCR, it has become clear that — despite Jordan's ambitious approach — none of the three traditional durable solutions envisaged by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is viable. Resettlement remains marginal, return is in many cases neither safe nor desirable, and local integration is politically blocked.

Resettlement has been an option only for particularly vulnerable refugees, due to the limited number of places. Global resettlement numbers have plummeted, after key destination countries such as the United States effectively withdrew their participation, and the already slim chances of resettlement have fallen further.

Returning to Syria also remains unattractive and difficult for many Syrian refugees, despite the power transition. Nevertheless, returnee numbers grew initially (almost 200,000 between December 2024 and the end of 2025), as did the intention to return. According to a UNHCR survey conducted in February 2025, 40 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan planned to return within the following twelve months. By June 2025, however, the figure had dropped to just 22 per cent. The main obstacles are ongoing security concerns, lack of housing, and limited employment opportunities in Syria. There are also legal and economic hurdles on the Jordanian side: Many Syrian households in Jordan report having debts — often resulting from high rents, healthcare costs, or fees related to work permits — that may hinder their departure. Problems with identity documents and property disputes further complicate the situation.

It is therefore unlikely that the refugee situation in Jordan will be resolved through voluntary return. Nevertheless, the Jordanian government is banking on this solution and, according to experts, has no plans for mass forced repatriations in the future.

Local integration of Syrian refugees with comprehensive rights and obligations, as favored by donors, has never been the Jordanian government's plan. Jordan has not signed the Geneva Refugee Convention, so conditions for Syrians are governed primarily by administrative regulations and cooperation with UNHCR, without comprehensive national asylum legislation.

Despite efforts to go further, the objective of international aid in Jordan has therefore been to enable Syrian refugees to lead a “decent life” during a prolonged temporary stay, rather than permanent integration. Although Jordan willingly accepted refugees and donors have provided many years of fairly generous support, the resulting interim arrangements are precarious and offer Syrians in Jordan neither substantial rights nor meaningful prospects.

Interim solutions as a political compromise

The ongoing state of limbo for refugees in Jordan is the outcome of a political compromise. Jordan granted refugees limited legal, social, and economic participation as long as this was temporary, controllable, and externally funded. Donors supported pragmatic interim solutions without being able to successfully advocate for permanent integration, and refugees used the resulting leeway to get on with their daily lives.

This situation stems from the divergence of political objectives between the Jordanian government and the donors. These have existed since the refugees began arriving in 2011, and continue to shape their treatment to this day.

Several factors account for the Jordanian government's stance of willingly hosting refugees while rejecting their integration.

These include demographic and identity-related sensitivities associated with the country's history and the naturalization of many Palestinians, who make up an estimated half to two-thirds of the country's residents. This ambivalent experience, whose causes include the 1970–71 civil war between the Jordanian army and Palestinian militias, contributes to the Jordanian government's reluctance to pursue any policy that could be interpreted as permanent integration of additional large groups of refugees. A strained labor market and the government's desire to protect Jordanians from competition for scarce jobs also play a role.

At the same time, Syrian refugees were widely accepted by the public, in part on account of cultural affinities, and their presence was closely associated with an expectation of international support. Jordan was able to mobilize substantial aid and investment, and ensured that vulnerable Jordanians and host communities also benefited from international programs. This approach by aid organizations is in line with the good practices of development-oriented refugee policy, as normally applied in far poorer host countries. Jordan, as a middle-income country, has succeeded in leveraging international support to its advantage.

Western donors have had to navigate conflicting interests. As well as seeking to alleviate humanitarian distress, they also wished to establish a long-term perspective for refugees in Jordan, in order to limit onward migration to Europe — which is a political hot potato for many European governments — while avoiding the expensive route of providing long-term humanitarian aid through camps or parallel structures. To this end, they sought to create in-country prospects for refugees and promote their economic self-sufficiency, most obviously through local integration. However, Europe's interest in regional stability and reducing irregular migration weakened its willingness to risk open conflict with the Jordanian government — or even just to make aid more conditional — over structural and legal

improvements for refugees, such as free access to the labor market.

Status quo: staying without integrating

These interim arrangements can be understood as forms of limited participation that enable Syrian refugees to go about their daily lives in Jordan without securing their residency legally, socially, or economically. Many of them are not legally backed but remain revocable, temporary, limited to specific sectors, and dependent on external funding. They bridge the emergency situation without resolving the fundamental insecurity and lack of prospects, let alone offering lasting solutions.

Paid work: precarious, temporary, often informal

Precarious and temporary arrangements have become particularly prevalent in the realm of paid employment. Jordan's labor market is largely closed to foreign workers. In the case of Syrian refugees, the Jordanian government has essentially limited access to formal employment to a few, predominantly low-skilled and low-wage jobs in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and certain service industries. The administrative hurdles and expense associated with obtaining work permits, as well as the great importance of short-term, flexible employment strategies in many refugee households, also favor informal employment. In 2025, 93 per cent of employed Syrian refugees lacked a work permit.⁰⁶

A significant reform effort launched in 2016, the so-called Jordan Compact, achieved limited success. In return for Jordan committing to expanding Syrian refugees' access to work permits in selected sectors and special economic zones, international donors offered additional funding, including grants and low-interest loans (despite Jordan's status as a middle-income country) and economic policy incentives. The latter included simplified EU rules of origin, which enable

preferential tariffs for exports to the EU. The Jordan Compact was intended to herald a shift toward economic win-win solutions, and was accompanied by high expectations. While it theoretically expanded access to the labor market, it did little in practice to address the precarious and informal nature of the jobs actually available — not least because it was inadequately adapted to local conditions.

In recent years, the Jordanian government has also begun to tighten regulation of informal employment, for example through stricter labor market oversight. At the same time, the subsidy program for work permits for Syrian refugees — which had been co-funded under the Jordan Compact by donors including the World Bank — expired in July 2024. As a result, the costs of formal employment rose significantly. This increases the incentives for workers and employers to turn to the informal sector.

Meanwhile, efforts to formalize employment have created new financial risks for some refugees. For example, 22 per cent of surveyed Syrian refugees reported having debts to Jordanian institutions, including the Jordanian Social Security Corporation. High contributions — and even higher arrears — can make formal employment unattractive, especially for those with low and unstable incomes.

Economic and social survival strategies

Against the backdrop of precarious work, cash-for-work programs run by humanitarian and development organizations remain important. They provide refugees with short-term income, relatively safe working conditions, and potentially new social and financial opportunities, particularly for women. At the same time, these programs are temporary and rarely lead to secure long-term employment.

In many cases, economic survival relies on a fragile mix of humanitarian aid, private debt, and support from social networks, with heavy dependence on external assis-

tance. Two-thirds of Syrian refugees in Jordan live below the poverty line, and many resort to negative coping strategies such as buying food on credit, child labor, or cutting back on spending on health and education. Debt is a central feature of daily life. According to UNHCR data for 2024, nine out of ten refugee households were borrowing to meet their basic needs. Declining aid, rising living costs, and regional instability only exacerbate those pressures. Under these conditions, remaining in (or returning to) camps can also represent a survival strategy, because — at least for now — international funding ensures a minimum level of services and infrastructure there. However, 81 per cent of registered refugees live in host communities, preferring greater independence over life in the camps, which offer more comprehensive care at the price of fewer opportunities for social and economic participation. In many cases, however, these strategies provide only short-term security. The future funding of the camps is uncertain and services have already been reduced; complete closure is a real possibility.

Documents required, but long-term security not on offer

Obtaining Jordanian citizenship, and thus full integration, is not a realistic option for Syrian refugees. The nationality law is restrictive; naturalization is politically sensitive and in practice unattainable for the vast majority.

Nevertheless, Syrian refugees need documents, such as the UNHCR asylum seeker/refugee certificate and the service card issued by the interior ministry, to prove their legal residence and protection status, and to access everyday services. While these documents are required, for example, to apply for a work permit and to access subsidized health care, their holders' status remains temporary. Furthermore, issues around documentation, in particular regarding birth, marriage, and death certificates, can create additional barriers to proving identity, engaging in paid work,

accessing health care, or exercising mobility.

Education: partial integration without continuity

Jordan's policy of limited participation is also evident in the education sector. Jordan has, with substantial support from international donors, provided Syrian children with free access to primary and secondary education, often through a double-shift system in regular schools, where Syrian students were taught in a second shift in the afternoon. More than 80 per cent of Syrian children attended school during the 2024–25 school year, facilitating partial social inclusion and largely preventing the emergence of a “lost generation.” Often, however, this form of partial integration fails to offer a perspective: Syrian students face significant obstacles in making the transitions to secondary school, vocational training, and higher education, in part due to the associated costs. Those challenges are frequently compounded by classroom overcrowding, reduced teaching hours, lack of support services, and lack of access to scholarships, vocational training, and regular employment.

A compromise under pressure

The political transition in Syria and the sharp decline in international funding are gradually eroding interim solutions that arose as compromises. Washington has slashed its funding for humanitarian aid and development cooperation, and donors such as Germany are also scaling back their support. In 2025, the 3RP for Jordan showed a funding gap of 65 per cent.

This weakens precisely those instruments that have to date most helped to stabilize Syrian refugees' stay in Jordan — humanitarian aid, educational opportunities, cash-for-work programs, and services in the camps. As well as reducing the level of protection for refugees, the cuts also limit donors' political leverage to demand more substantial

rights, better employment opportunities, or mobility regulations from Jordan.

Jordanian expectations that return will significantly alleviate the refugee situation in the medium and longer term are likely to be only partially fulfilled. If support within the country declines, employment opportunities remain precarious, and residency conditions become more restrictive, the risk increases that decisions to return will be made under pressure. As well as undermining the principle of voluntary return, that can also create new protection risks, renewed displacement, and social destabilization in Syria. It also complicates the new Syrian government's plans to close camps for internally displaced persons by 2027.

The compromise between Jordan and international donors, which is organized through a multitude of interim arrangements, has worked for a long time, but was insufficiently solution-oriented. Under pressure of dwindling funding and rising expectations of return to Syria, there is a growing risk of refugees being pushed further into poverty, debt, and a lack of prospects.

What comes next?

The example of Jordan clearly illustrates the limited scope for lasting solutions in protracted refugee situations, even in a relatively generous and welcoming country that both cooperates closely with international donors and is dependent on them. The question for donors is: what can be learned from the experience in Jordan and what options still exist?

Learning from experience

Little progress was made in certain areas facing specific conceptual, political, or technical challenges. In retrospect, suggestions for improvement are obvious here.

The first point concerns the language and objectives of the donors' refugee policies. While the reference to durable solutions

remained normatively important, it had very limited impact on the political realities on the ground. Above all, local integration — as a term and a concept — met with decisive rejection by the Jordanian government. This led to ad hoc interim solutions, but also to compromise terms that obscured the conflicting objectives and invited a hasty interpretation of the interim solutions as progress. Here, a more transparent and honest approach in donors' goals and interests would have been desirable, in order to promote awareness of problems and to be able to rethink and change their course of action.

Second, the Jordan Compact revealed the limits of interest-based win-win approaches. Although its intention to align the interests of Jordan and the (European) donors was politically innovative and promising, the expectation that work permits, economic incentives, and trade concessions would promote employment, development, and refugee protection proved overambitious. While the Compact did help expand formal access to the labor market, key problems remained unresolved. Syrian workers' demand for factory jobs — which were not very lucrative for them — remained low, partly because the factories were often remote and many had experience only in agriculture or the service sector. Work permits remained expensive and difficult to obtain. Although the plan to harness the economic potential of Syrian refugees as migrant workers did not work out, the Compact remains instructive because it demonstrates the possibility of interest-based compromises. Achieving the intended employment and protection outcomes would have required action to address structural and cultural barriers, such as those in Jordan's textile sector and regarding Syrian women's participation in the labor market. More comprehensive involvement of stakeholders and their expertise could have ensured this.

A *third* lesson concerns "cash-for-work," a long-standing humanitarian tool that experienced a surge in popularity after the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. It has been widely used in Jordan, and — unlike in the

past — also for development-oriented purposes. Its short-term strengths are undisputed: cash-for-work ensures that those in need receive help quickly, while also contributing to social cohesion and infrastructure. However, the latter — like employment effects in general — should not be overestimated. If cash-for-work is to achieve more than short-term stabilization, it must be more closely linked to skills training, certification, follow-up opportunities, and regular employment pathways — and ultimately render itself obsolete. The tool's success in combatting poverty also depends significantly on the level of payments. Otherwise, it is useful for responding to humanitarian emergencies, but has limited wider impact.

Fourth, the question of conditionality arises. Even though European and other donors possessed financial leverage over Jordan, which is heavily dependent on external aid, they made only limited use of this to secure more substantial rights for Syrian refugees, opportunities for mobility between Jordan, Syria, and third countries, or longer-term prospects. Even though it remains unclear what concessions the Jordanian government might have been willing to make, the risk of onward migration apparently deterred European donors from any serious attempt to negotiate better prospects for Syrian refugees. In retrospect, it is impossible to say whether greater courage would have made a decisive difference. What is clear is that the interim arrangements tied up considerable financial resources without eliminating the fundamental uncertainty surrounding residency status.

Recommendations for Action

What lessons can be drawn for the future work of donors such as Germany and the EU? Durable solutions remain essential when addressing the displacement crisis, even though the political and financial leeway continues to shrink. This makes it all the more important to carefully prioritize international support in Jordan.

Basic needs and protection: The German government should help maintain basic provision and protection for refugees to ensure they can live with dignity in Jordan, even if local integration remains blocked. This is all the more important given that the most vulnerable households often find it most difficult to return to Syria, on account of their lack of resources, contacts, and possessions there. Further cuts to support would exacerbate poverty, debt, and negative coping strategies, and increase the risk of involuntary return decisions. If refugees leave Jordan not because they see viable prospects in Syria, but because remaining becomes impossible for economic reasons, that risks jeopardizing Syria's stability.

Return as a process: International donors and aid organizations should support return as a process. Safe and dignified return presupposes reliable information, counseling on legal consequences, and opportunities for formalized "go-and-see" visits and re-entry, especially for households returning in stages. During the return process, protection monitoring and administrative support are crucial. Particular attention should be paid to the protection of female returnees and female-headed households. Upon arrival in Syria, returnees need assistance with legal and property issues as well as support in finding housing and work and accessing basic services. Return assistance should not be limited to logistics and start-up aid, but should serve to prevent further protection risks and displacement. Given the still fragile situation in Syria, the German government should also prioritize support for return from within the region over return from Germany.

Complementary mobility options: In addition to their own resettlement programs (especially for vulnerable refugees), international donors should expand complementary mobility options such as trans-

national and regional mobility, as well as education and training pathways for refugees.

Opportunities for transnational (labor) mobility between Jordan and Syria should be promoted, including by removing administrative and financial barriers related to work permits and social security debts, or by establishing practical procedures for issuing identity documents.

Existing educational programs for Syrian refugees should be more strongly oriented toward successful educational transitions and regular migration pathways, in order to contribute to transnational mobility (including beyond the region). Donors should therefore expand successful efforts in primary education to include secondary, vocational, and tertiary education. In the process, they should remove cost barriers, promote skills development and certification, and facilitate the recognition of qualifications. By offering scholarships, training and study programs, and work-related mobility programs in Germany and the EU, the German government can help link educational qualifications obtained in Jordan to realistic pathways for further migration and education — in Jordan, Syria, or via regular labor mobility channels in third countries.

Donors should make their financial support — for refugees remaining in Jordan, returning to Syria, or for complementary mobility — conditional on concrete relief from administrative burdens — for example, regarding work permits, social security debts, and re-entry and identity documents. Donors should demand these from the Jordanian government.

Rather than merely managing the limited participation of Syrian refugees, the top priority for Germany and the EU should be to ensure that refugees are provided with real prospects and viable migration pathways — through protection, reliable rights, and options for regular mobility.



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SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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