

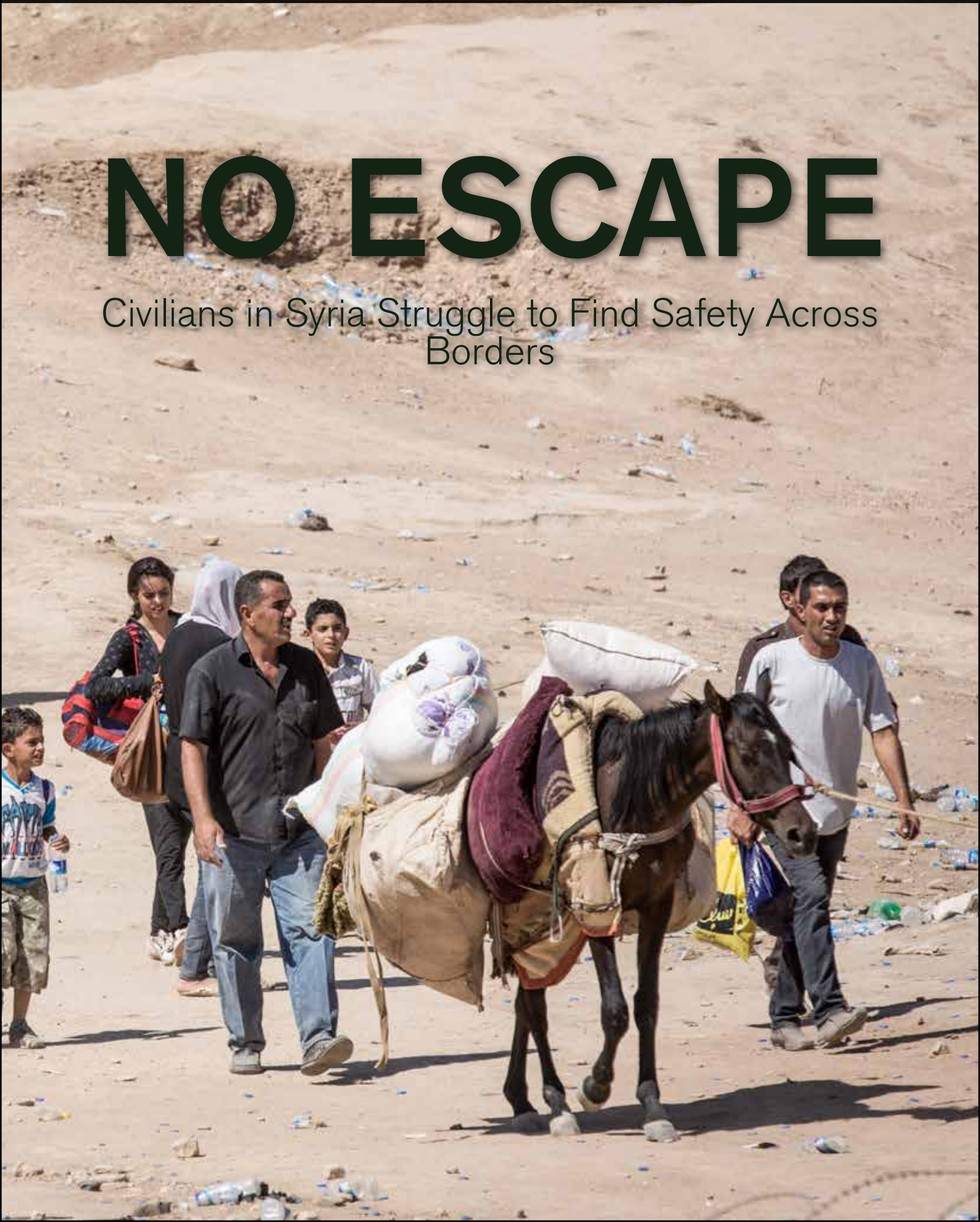
NRC

NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL



NO ESCAPE

Civilians in Syria Struggle to Find Safety Across Borders



No Escape
Civilians in Syria Struggle to Find Safety Across Borders.

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Cover Photo: People fleeing from Syria to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in August 2013. The border has been intermittently closed for the past 18 months, with the notable exception of a period in the summer of 2013 and from January to April 2014. Photo: Christian Jepsen, NRC

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Executive Summary

Life for Syrians trying to escape violence has reached a new level of hopelessness. Active conflict prevents aid from reaching those stuck inside Syria, while border controls are tightening, reducing civilians' ability to flee. In neighboring countries, health care, education and other basic services are now beyond the reach of many Syrian refugees. And so the despair continues, unabated.

The hospitality of countries bordering Syria is at a breaking point. The strain is most felt in communities hosting refugees, where growing poverty and unrest is leading to increased insecurity, a phenomenon affecting the entire region. In the absence of sufficient support to help host governments cope with the social and economic impact of the Syria crisis, Syria's neighbors are taking measures to stem the tide of refugees. In October 2014, only 18,453 refugees were registered by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), an 88 percent drop from the 2013 monthly average. For refugees from Syria, the space to live freely and in dignity is also now smaller than ever before.

Resettlement outside the region, an option which can be life-saving, has been offered on an extremely limited basis by countries not neighboring Syria. As of the start of November 2014, less than 2 percent of the registered refugee population has secured a resettlement place.

To ensure countries bordering Syria are supported and that the right to seek asylum is respected for those fleeing the civil war in Syria, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) **recommend** the following:

Recognizing the generous funds provided to date, as part of a greater package of sustained support, the **international community should:**

- Urgently increase its humanitarian and development (including bilateral) support for Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Development investments should prioritize improving public infrastructure, alternative shelter solutions that increase the overall housing stock, health and education services as well as income-earning opportunities that can best benefit both host communities and refugee populations.
- Step up and save lives through resettlement and alternative humanitarian admissions programs or other immigration options. Wealthy countries, particularly those that have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, should move swiftly to ensure at least 5 percent of refugees are able to access protection outside the region. Existing quotas for resettlement and alternative programs should be expanded to accommodate many more refugees, prioritizing those who are most vulnerable.
- Support refugee-hosting governments to develop clear, appropriate and affordable administrative procedures that allow refugees from Syria to obtain and retain legal documents (including residency), regardless of where they entered or where they are displaced.

Understanding the very real social, economic and security threat facing countries neighboring Syria, **we urge Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq to:**

- Create a joint appeal, outlining the support needed from the international community to ensure that bor-

ders are consistently open to civilians fleeing Syria, without discrimination.

- Work with aid agencies, particularly UNHCR, to increase humanitarian monitoring and ensure immediate assistance is provided to asylum seekers in and around borders. This will allow more support to be provided to those in need and will also help authorities identify vulnerable groups, who should be prioritized and fast-tracked for registration and assistance.

Humanitarian Agencies Should:

- Work with host governments to

support the implementation of existing commitments and guidelines related to the registration and documentation of refugees, including individual registration for women so that they can receive documents required to access basic services.

- Strengthen information and services outreach to refugee, such as the provision of mobile services outside of camps and to places where refugees face serious restrictions upon their movement. Aid programs should be designed to support the needs of both refugees and host communities.

Introduction

The civil war in Syria continues unabated and has led to the worst humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century. The conflict has claimed the lives of more than 191,000 people,⁽¹⁾ and violations of international law are widespread, with Syrian civilians bearing the brunt of atrocities. Close to 11 million people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, and 9.65 million people have fled their homes in search of safety.⁽²⁾ Sufficient quantities of aid are not entering Syria, while ongoing fighting and border restrictions prevent desperate civilians from fleeing. Increasingly, Syria is a place of no escape.

Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq (including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)) are to be commended for the substantial and generous hospitality they have shown to more than three million refugees from Syria,⁽³⁾ the majority of whom live outside of camps. Lebanon is now the highest per capita refugee-hosting country in the world,⁽⁴⁾ and is facing an immense strain on its economy and social services. Jordan and Turkey are also severely affected. Iraq is experiencing a double crisis; in addition to hosting refugees from Syria, nearly 1.9 million Iraqis have been displaced as a result of recent fighting in the country.⁽⁵⁾

This hospitality has not come without substantial costs for host communities and the Syrian refugees they are supporting. Syria's neighbors are now facing severe overcrowding in schools and medical facilities, rapidly increasing housing prices, and significant competition for paid work, creating tensions between refugees and local communities. Their governments are responding to rising refugee numbers in several ways: they continue to provide substantial support to vulnerable refugees and local people, and facilitate the work of aid agencies, while simultaneously limiting access to services, restricting the movements of existing Syrian refugee populations, and limiting the entry of new refugees into their countries.

In the context of increasing humanitarian needs within Syria and in neighboring countries, legitimate national security concerns and insufficient international support, the formal and informal border crossings out of Syria are now often effectively closed to men, women and children seeking safety. Hundreds of thousands of people are estimated to be living in camps and with host families near or even on the borders of neighboring countries, with many of them unable to leave Syria.⁽¹²⁾

At the same time, countries not sharing borders with Syria have shown a remarkable lack of solidarity both with Syria's civilian population seeking to escape violence and with the neighboring countries that host the overwhelming majority of refugees.

The Economic Impact of the Syria Crisis on Neighboring Countries⁽⁶⁾

The World Bank has estimates that the Syrian crisis has cost the Lebanese economy around \$7.5 billion. Tax revenue has dropped by \$1.5 billion at a time when government expenditure is estimated to be rising by \$1.1 billion; significant losses have been felt in consumer spending, trade, profits and investment. Overcrowded schools and health facilities, and the deterioration in water, sanitation and other infrastructures will require an additional \$2.5 billion just to be restored to their pre-Syria crisis levels.⁽⁷⁾

In Jordan, a Ministry of Finance and USAID commissioned report estimated that the cost of hosting refugees in 2014 will reach \$871 million, or 2.4 percent of GDP.⁽⁸⁾ In its National Resilience Plan (2014-16), the Government of Jordan estimated that it needed \$1.2 billion in 2014 to maintain existing levels of basic services, including \$731 million for water and sanitation, education, health, housing and other services.⁽⁹⁾

According to Turkey's Finance Minister, the financial cost of hosting Syrian refugees on Turkey reached \$4.5 billion in November 2014, requiring \$2.3 billion from the central government budget. Turkey's Interior Ministry reports that 72 out of 81 Turkish provinces are currently home to Syrians who have fled their country, creating a huge strain on public services and infrastructure.⁽¹⁰⁾

There is no comprehensive data on the economic impact of the Syria crisis on Iraq. However, the humanitarian and financial cost of supporting more than two million displaced people (more than 220,000 Syrian refugees and those recently displaced within Iraq, since the beginning of 2014)⁽¹¹⁾ has placed an enormous strain on its economy and infrastructure.

Woefully small numbers of refugees have been accepted for resettlement outside of the region. A telling but all too representative example: in September and October 2014 alone, Turkey received 190,000 refugees, far more than the entire international community has committed to resettle since the start of the Syrian conflict.⁽¹³⁾

"While countries neighbouring the conflict are being asked to keep their borders open, I find it disconcerting how many Syrians struggle to find protection in Europe, with reports of people being pushed back from a number of borders. And all this is happening although the overall numbers are small in comparison – Turkey alone has received 10 times the number of Syrian refugees as all EU member states together." ⁽¹²⁾

Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, January 2014

While immense challenges confront those inside Syria, this report focuses on those who are desperately trying to leave. It highlights the barriers faced by asylum seekers from Syria - many of whom have already been displaced several times within the country - in getting to safety and accessing assistance across its borders. These challenges need to be placed firmly within the context of the severe impact that the war in Syria and the resulting refugee crisis have had on neighboring countries, as documented extensively by the World Bank,⁽¹⁵⁾ aid agencies and refugee-hosting governments.⁽¹⁶⁾ Neither IRC nor NRC are currently operational in Egypt, and it is therefore not covered in this report.



At least 191,000 people have died in the devastating war in Syria and more than 9.5 million people have been forced to flee. The photo shows a reported barrel bomb strike on Aleppo in September 2014. Photo: NTB/ Scanpix

Refugee Flows and Restrictions

Syria shares a border with Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Of these, only Turkey and Israel are a state party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, although Turkey applies geographical limits in only recognizing refugees from Europe.⁽¹⁷⁾ Israel remains in a state of war with Syria and officially denies entry to Syrian asylum-seekers; however, some Syrians have received medical care in the country.

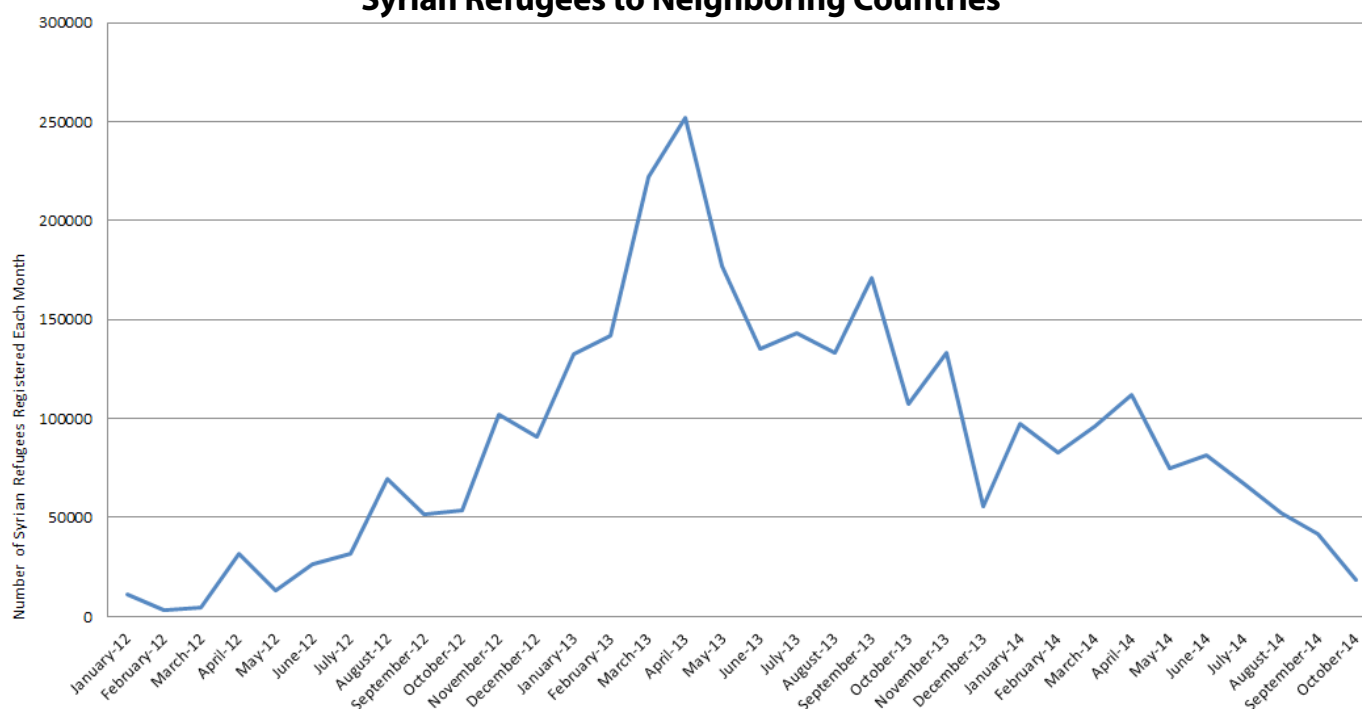
In recent months, despite continuing violence in Syria, the overall number of refugees leaving the country has decreased dramatically.⁽¹⁸⁾ October 2014 saw high levels of conflict in 10 of Syria's 13 governorates.⁽¹⁹⁾ In 2013, an average of 150,000 refugees were registered each month by UNHCR. This figure dropped to an average of approximately 78,000 per month for the first nine months of 2014. In October 2014, the figure was only 18,453,⁽²⁰⁾ representing an 88 percent drop from the 2013 monthly average (see chart below).⁽²¹⁾ Even the reduced number of refugees entering neighboring countries

in October 2014 is more than double the number of refugees from Syria who have, as of November 2014, been resettled to countries outside the region through UNHCR-facilitated programs.⁽²²⁾

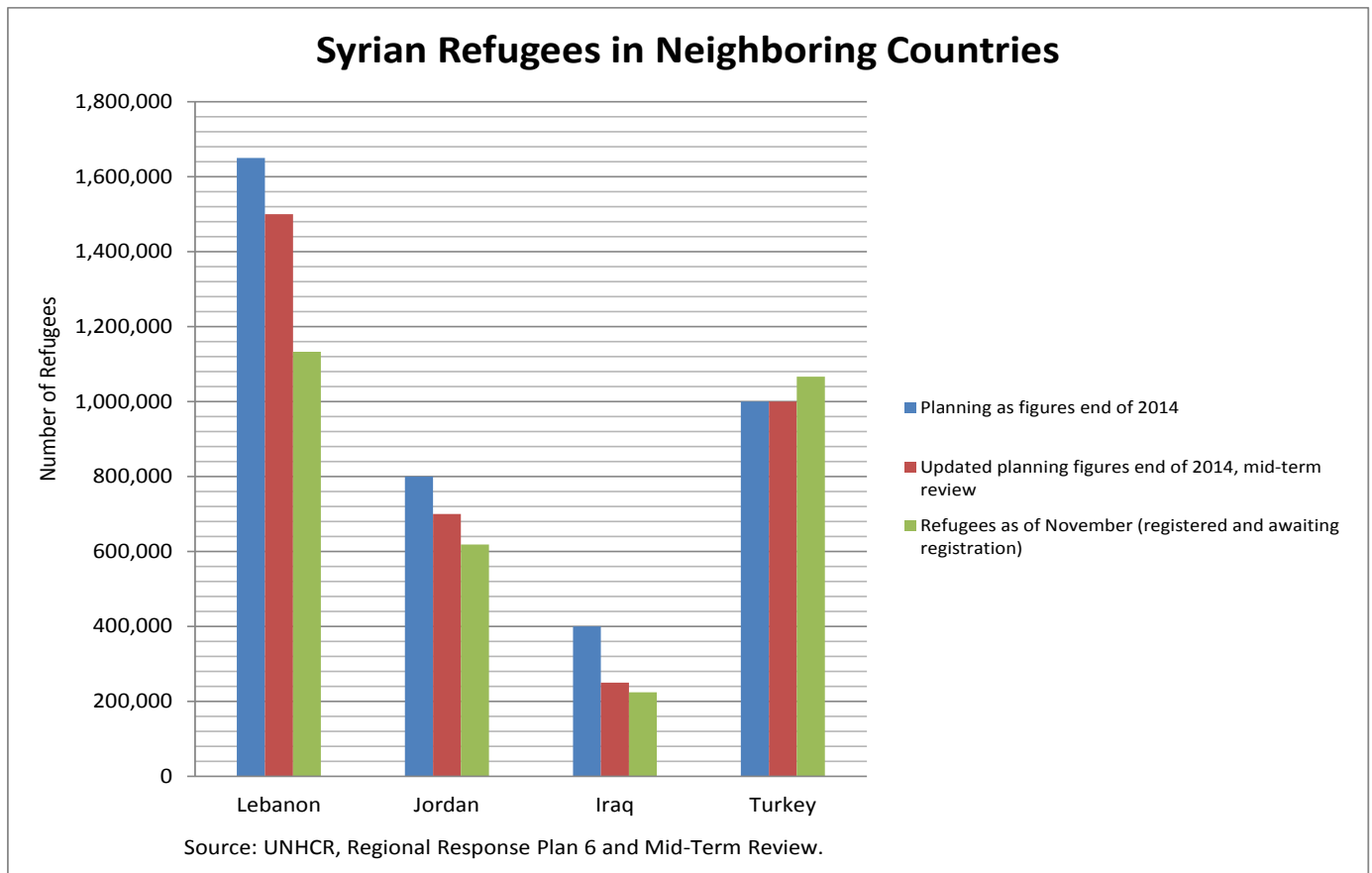
The drop in the number of people leaving Syria is reflected in the revised mid-year United Nations (UN) planning figures (see chart below). In January 2014 the UN predicted that the number of refugees living in countries neighboring Syria would reach 4.1 million by the end of the year. In June 2014, this was revised downwards to 3.59 million.⁽²³⁾ As of the start of November 2014, the number of refugees in neighboring countries stands at 3.2 million.⁽²⁴⁾

Citing widely-acknowledged and legitimate security, social and economic concerns, all states neighboring Syria regulate entry of asylum seekers from the country, leading in increasing numbers of people to use dangerous crossing points including land-mined areas to escape the conflict.

Syrian Refugees to Neighboring Countries



Source: Calculations based on accumulative figures from UNHCR



There are some commonalities among the measures Syria's neighbors have introduced to restrict movement across their borders from the country. For example, they have introduced policies that prevent refugees who have travelled back to Syria from re-entering. They also often deny entry to asylum seekers who do not have identity documents. This is of particular concern given reports of people being stripped of their identity documents or losing such documents in Syria when they are forced to flee, and due to the existence of stateless people among those seeking to escape.⁽²⁵⁾ Despite increased border restrictions, all countries neighboring Syria continue to grant defined exemptions that permit entry, for example to those requiring urgent medical care.

In October 2014 the **Lebanese** Government announced that it would heavily restrict the flow of refugees into the country.⁽²⁶⁾ Certain exceptions will continue to be granted, including for those with evident means or professional qualifications, as well as for urgent humanitarian cases.⁽²⁷⁾ Reports indicate that

the official Lebanese border crossings have been impassable to a significant number of Syrian asylum seekers since early September 2014 (and to Palestinian refugees from Syria for over a year).⁽²⁸⁾ Furthermore, in October 2014, a humanitarian agency at the border reported that an estimated 60 percent of refugees trying to cross were turned away.⁽²⁹⁾

Officially, **Jordan's** borders remain open to refugees from Syria, though stricter controls were introduced from the start of 2013.⁽³⁰⁾ As a result, the average number of new arrivals has dropped from up to 60,000 per month to around 10,000 people per month from January to September 2014.⁽³¹⁾ Restrictions reportedly include the withholding of permission from Palestinian refugees from Syria to enter the country⁽³²⁾ and limiting Syrian nationals' access to Jordan, including through the formal border crossing points.⁽³³⁾ During October 2014, only 344 people were officially recorded as arriving to Azraq Refugee Camp (now the primary destination for newly arrived refugees to Jordan).⁽³⁴⁾ Jordan is now experiencing a net decrease in the overall

refugee registration figures as the rate of new arrivals is exceeded by the number of people returning to Syria (including deportees, families separated by border closures wishing to reunite, medical cases or because of the lack of basic livelihoods options in Jordan).⁽³⁵⁾ According to the Syria Needs Assessment Project, in early October some 5,000 people were waiting along the Syrian side of informal crossing points with little access to humanitarian assistance and protection.⁽³⁶⁾

Waiting for Family Members Still Inside Syria

“Sahar” fled Syria with her family in October 2012. For a long time her family had thought the war would not affect them. They were doing well financially and lived in a peaceful suburb outside Damascus. However, after three months of fighting, the family was forced to flee. “There were armed men everywhere in our town, as well as snipers on the main road,” Sahar remembers.

The family was able to find safety in neighboring Lebanon, where people received them warmly. However, things changed when her 13-year-old brother fell ill last summer. The family could not afford to pay for medical treatment in Lebanon, and the only solution was to travel to Damascus, Syria's capital. A younger brother and their grandmother accompanied the boy on the journey. On their way back to Lebanon, after receiving treatment in Syria, the two brothers waited at the Masnaa border crossing for five hours, but were not allowed to pass. They tried to enter Lebanon again two weeks later, but were again turned back. “We applied for a mercy petition at the beginning of October 2014, and we are still waiting to hear back,” Sahar says.

Separated from her young brothers, the young woman worries about their safety in war-ravaged Syria. “They move from home to home in Syria, staying with relatives and friends of the family. We do not want to bring them into Lebanon illegally; we do not want to take that risk,” she says.

The borders between **Iraq** (including the KRI) and Syria have remained intermittently closed for the past eighteen months. The Peshkhabour border was open for a two-week period in the summer of 2013 (40,000 refugees⁽³⁷⁾ were allowed to cross from Syria to KRI), and again from January to April 2014. In addition, in October 2014 Kurdish authorities allowed some 14,000 refugees from Syria who had fled to Turkey to enter the KRI via the Iraqi-Turkish border. This northern border remains open as of early November 2014.⁽³⁸⁾ The restrictions on entry across the Syrian border reflect growing security concerns and the difficulties faced by both host communities and displaced populations in the KRI. In addition to hosting 225,000 refugees from Syria, fighting in Iraq over the past year has displaced more than 1.8 million people, close to half of whom are living in the KRI.⁽³⁹⁾

Turkey maintains a declared policy of open borders. However, due to the rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers and difficulties in expanding the capacity of existing refugee camps, not all Syrians seeking safety and protection in Turkey are admitted. (Those without identity documents face particular difficulties). This has led some Syrians to enter Turkey through unofficial border crossings. Camps located just inside Syria along the border with Turkey are currently housing some 170,000 people (often offering little security and limited services), and it is assumed that at least some of these camp residents wish to cross the border into Turkey. In September 2014, the Government of Turkey took the commendable decision to open a 30-kilometer section of its border with Syria to admit large numbers of people fleeing fighting in Kobane.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The recent arrival of 190,000 refugees from the town comes on top of the more than one million refugees already being hosted by Turkey.⁽⁴¹⁾ As of the end of October 2014, just two border crossings remained formally open for refugees, while two other crossings offer restricted access only.⁽⁴²⁾



Children walk through the mud in a camp for people displaced within Syria. There are many camps located near Syria's borders with neighboring countries. Photo: NTB/Scampix

Returns

Refoulement; forced return of refugees to Syria⁽⁴³⁾

According to human right groups, there is evidence that some refugees who have made it across the borders into neighboring countries are facing forcible repatriation to Syria, or are at increased risk of deportation, often for not having the correct documentation or for belonging to a certain political, age, gender and/or ethnic group.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Principle of Non-Refoulement

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines who is a refugee, a refugee's rights and the legal obligations of states. Countries that have ratified the Refugee Convention are obliged to protect refugees who are on their territory. The 1951 Convention states that:

"No Contracting State shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social or political opinion" (Article 33(1)).

The prohibition of forcible return is considered part of customary international law, meaning that states not party to the 1951 Convention are obliged to respect the principle of non-refoulement and not forcibly repatriate refugees.

In Lebanon, refugees are considered to be living in the country illegally if they lack the necessary documentation (as highlighted in a report recently published by NRC. This has led to an increasing number of departure orders being served to refugees from Syria.⁽⁴⁵⁾ According to the Syria Needs Assessment Project, "In Jordan, 2014 has seen

a significant increase in the number of forced returns of Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS), including women, children and older people".⁽⁴⁶⁾ Aid agencies and newly arrived refugees report that in October 2014, 45 to 80 percent of asylum seekers (Syrian and Palestinian) were sent back to Syria from the Raba' al Sarhan Transit Centre in north-eastern Jordan before they were able to register with UNHCR.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Short-term Visits to Syria

The lack of economic options and legal protection outside of Syria⁽⁴⁸⁾ has led significant numbers of refugees to decide to return to the country, most often on a temporary basis, despite the on-going violence and deprivation.

UN staff and refugee-hosting governments estimate that hundreds of thousands of refugees are travelling to Syria each year, most often to check on property, retrieve or renew documents or provide vital support to family members and friends before re-entering neighboring countries.

Prior to the announcement of the new border restrictions, the Lebanese Ministry of Interior estimated that up to 800,000 instances of temporary return to Syria and re-entry to Lebanon by Syrian nationals were occurring each month.⁽⁴⁹⁾ In Jordan the government stated that over 100,000 refugees returned to Syria from 2013 to mid-2014,⁽⁵⁰⁾ while 150,000 refugees are estimated to have travelled from Turkey to Syria in the past year alone.⁽⁵¹⁾ In the KRI, UNHCR reports indicate that between January 2014 and September 2014, more than 57,000 refugees went back to Syria.⁽⁵²⁾ Returning to Syria for short periods of time will be almost impossible under the border policies being introduced across the region.

Returned to Syria

Ahmed (25) fled Syria this summer, and has found safety in neighboring Jordan. However, the flight was a dangerous one. "I left Dar'a 21 days ago, it took me 18 days to get here," says Ahmed, only some days after arriving to Azraq refugee camp. "It took me this long because there are many obstacles on the way," he explains.

Ahmed had to pay between one hundred and two hundred dollars to escape. "We moved between two fronts, and tried not to be seen or shot by any of the sides. You are risking your life and might get shot or caught," Ahmed says.

"Some people were sent back to Dar'a, because they don't have any form of identification. My friend had his ID taken away from him in Syria. He had a copy of his ID, but he was sent back regardless. Men with no family, no ID, and no proof of their marriage are sent back," Ahmed says.

Refugees who travel back to Syria from neighboring countries have difficulties re-entering: "People go back to check on their families, or to bring someone back with them [to Jordan]. Once you leave, you are sometimes not allowed to enter Jordan again," Ahmed explains.

Legal Status of Refugees Within Host Countries

Even as fewer and fewer people attempting to flee Syria are being allowed entry into neighboring countries, existing refugee populations face increased difficulties accessing essential services, securing livelihoods and moving freely within host states. These challenges often stem from their uncertain legal status (which can also prevent refugees from obtaining necessary documentation). As highlighted in a recent IRC report, women and girls without documentation face unique challenges obtaining marriage certificates and are more susceptible to harassment and abuse.⁽⁵³⁾

Lebanese law makes provisions for individual asylum seekers,⁽⁵⁴⁾ officially allowing non-nationals to submit asylum requests to the authorities. However, these regulations are not being implemented. As a result, refugees from Syria must acquire a residency visa and renew it every six months if they wish to remain in Lebanon. Residency is often not available to those who lack formal identification papers or to those who have entered Lebanon through unofficial border crossings. The cost of renewing residency visas (\$200) is expensive for refugees who already struggle to meet their basic needs.⁽⁵⁵⁾ In September 2014, the Lebanese Government took a commendable step by announcing that it would waive any fines and fees if refugees from Syria take steps to regu-

larize their stay; however, visas issued under the scheme will only be valid for six months without guarantee of further renewal. Without valid entry or stay documentation, refugees in Lebanon face additional challenges in sending their children to school, accessing health services, earning an income, or travelling within the country.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Fear of Arrest and Detention

Hassan (55) and his family, like many Syrians who have fled the conflict, entered Lebanon unofficially. Lacking legal residency in the country, and with war still raging in Syria, Hassan lives in constant fear of arrest and deportation. He is forced to limit his travel within Lebanon in order to avoid roadblocks and checkpoints where he may be arrested, detained or even deported if he is found without the right documents. This is affecting the health and wellbeing of his family:

"I live with my son and the rest of my family in the Bekaa Valley [in eastern Lebanon]. My son has no entry coupon since we entered Lebanon unofficially. When he got sick, we wanted to seek medical treatment elsewhere, but could not because we feared our son could be arrested at checkpoints."



Zaidan (4) and Aida (4) are among the 3.2 million refugees from Syria who have found safety in the neighbouring countries that have generously opened their borders. It is now getting harder and harder for people left inside Syria to escape. The photo is from a Syrian refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Photo: Becky Bakr Abdulla/NRC

In **Jordan**, refugees are required to have a Ministry of Interior “service card”, an official document that grants free access to certain basic health and education services in the country. However, Syrian refugees living outside of camps face increasing barriers to obtaining and renewing service cards.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This is particularly the case for the estimated 200,000 to 300,000 refugees who are unable to prove that they left the refugee camps through the official government “bailout” process, which amongst other things requires that refugees wishing to leave the camps have a direct relative who is a Jordanian citizen.⁽⁵⁸⁾

Following a decision by the Jordanian authorities, UNHCR is no longer able to issue asylum certificates in urban areas for refugees who left the camps outside of the bailout system after 14 July 2014.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Without a service card or UNHCR registration, refugees living outside of camps are often unable to access basic public or humanitarian services, or register marriages, births and deaths, and are at greater risk of arrest, detention and deportation.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Refugees living in urban areas without valid service cards are also increasingly at risk of

being returned to the refugee camps.⁽⁶¹⁾

In **Iraq**, the 1971 Political Refugees Law provides the legal basis for assisting people fleeing political persecution (although new refugees legislation is pending). Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the Kurdistan Regional Government has issued residency permits to registered refugees. Those with permits can rent houses, obtain work permits and access health care, education and other services. A small number of refugees from Syria living in the KRI, notably those outside camps, are facing difficulties obtaining residency permits.⁽⁶²⁾

Turkey implements a “temporary protection” regime which provides asylum seekers from Syria with many services, such as shelter, food, and healthcare. Since mid-October 2014, it also, in principle, permits access to the labor market. While the application of these new regulations may be restricted to certain jobs or to specific locations, it is a welcome policy change, which would allow thousands of registered refugees to earn a livelihood.

Resettlement

At a time when refugee-hosting countries are responding to growing socio-economic and security challenges by introducing measures that restrict the entry and stay of refugees, third-country governments are failing to offer anywhere near sufficient resettlement options. Less than two percent of the registered refugee population is being offered the option of resettlement, and even fewer have actually been resettled to date. In a report issued in September 2014, the aid agency Oxfam called for economically developed countries to resettle at least five percent of the Syrian refugee caseload by 2015.⁽⁶³⁾

Of the more than three million refugees from Syria living in neighboring countries, UNHCR aims to support the resettlement of 130,000 people between 2014 and 2016.⁽⁶⁴⁾ The total resettlement places pledged since late 2013 stands at approximately 50,000,⁽⁶⁵⁾ less than half the number of refugees who fled to Turkey

in just three days in September 2014.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Lebanon is currently home to 36 percent of all registered Syrian refugees (1.12 million),⁽⁶⁷⁾ yet only 4,528 of these have been allocated a place for potential resettlement, according to UNHCR.⁽⁶⁸⁾

From the start of the Syrian conflict in March 2011 until August 2014, only 7,000 refugees were resettled worldwide through UNHCR-facilitated programs.⁽⁶⁹⁾

European countries are not doing enough to resettle Syrian refugees. The notable exception is Germany (28,500 spaces pledged).⁽⁷⁰⁾ In contrast, France pledged to resettle a mere 500 refugees while the UK has said it will only take a few hundred.⁽⁷¹⁾ Although Canada has pledged over 1,000 places for private sponsorships, resettlement places for Syrians referred by UNHCR are limited to only 200 persons.⁽⁷²⁾



As homes and collective shelters fill up throughout Lebanon, it has become harder to find appropriate shelter for all Syrian refugees, as for the refugees living in this settlement in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Rising rental prices mean poor Lebanese families are also suffering. Photo: Sam Tarling, NRC

The **United States (US)** also needs to do more, and quickly. It is the world's largest resettlement country, but has yet to announce the number of Syrian refugees it will accept for resettlement. By the end of September 2014, only 166 refugees had been resettled in the US.⁽⁷³⁾ And while at least 4,000 additional referrals are in the US resettlement pipeline, with thousands more expected to be referred by UNHCR over the coming months,⁽⁷⁴⁾ these numbers are still small given the scale of the Syrian refugee crisis. For the US to increase resettlement opportunities for Syrians in the coming years, it is critical that the overall global refugee admissions ceiling in the US be raised beyond the current level of 70,000 persons.

It is also vital that third countries consider other means of fast-tracking admission of refugees from Syria beyond the refugee resettlement program. Options include the provision of student visas (as Portugal has done), family reunification programs (as supported by Switzerland and Sweden), private sponsorship arrangements (Canada has adopted this approach), or work visas for refugees.⁽⁷⁵⁾

In providing alternative immigration options to refugees from Syria, countries must continue to ensure that they collectively accept 100 percent of the Syrian refugee cases identified and referred by UNHCR, to ensure that the most vulnerable cases continue to receive overall priority (less vulnerable cases may be accepted through other avenues).

Resettlement (or related alternatives) alone cannot solve the refugee crisis. However, in conjunction with a fully financed humanitarian response (currently only 47 percent funded)⁽⁷⁶⁾ and development support (including bilateral assistance) to host governments, offering to resettle significant numbers of people outside the region will go some way to help alleviate refugees suffering the pressures on hosting communities in neighboring countries. It will

also demonstrate meaningful solidarity with countries bordering Syria and constitute a welcome contribution towards addressing our time's gravest humanitarian crisis.

Conclusion

The people and governments of Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq (particularly in the KRI) have shown enormous hospitality and commendable support to refugees from Syria. The resulting economic, social and other pressures on these countries are immense. To put it in perspective, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is tantamount to the United States absorbing the entire population of Germany. Similarly, the situation in Jordan is equivalent to all of Denmark moving to the UK or France.

Syria's neighbors must be supported by governments near and far to ensure that refugees and those countries' citizens continue to receive assistance and protection, and that closed borders are opened to families desperately trying to flee Syria's violence (including groups who often face systematic discrimination).

Sheltering and providing assistance to refugees from Syria is not a function of proximity; solidarity and support are the responsibility of governments and diverse public and private institutions across the globe. As the Syrian conflict approaches its fourth year and with no end to the fighting in sight, the international community must substantially increase developmental and humanitarian assistance in the region, and accept far greater numbers of refugees for resettlement and alternative forms of admission. Until the violence ceases and Syria's refugees can return home to rebuild their country, meaningful action and sustained commitment, rather than words, must constitute the support that the world extends to its struggling neighbors.

1. Commissioned by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic, Megan Price, Anita Gohdes and Patrick Ball, August 2014. Available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAGUpdatedReportAug2014.pdf> (last visited 7 November 2014).
2. UNOCHA data available at <http://www.unocha.org/syria> (last visited 10 November 2014). 3.2 million have fled Syria and another 6.45 million are displaced within Syria (total 9.65 million displaced). The pre-war population of Syria was between 22 and 23 million people.
3. In this report, civilians from Syria who have fled the fighting are referred to prima facie (as a group) as refugees in need of international assistance and protection (in the absence of evidence to the contrary). Of the countries hosting the vast majority of refugees from Syria, only Turkey has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention (though it applies geographical limits and only recognizes refugees from Europe). Civilians fleeing the violence in Syria are therefore not formally recognized as refugees by countries neighboring Syria. For more information on group determination of refugee status see: UNHCR, Refugee status and resettlement, p.98. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/3d464c954.pdf> (last visited 7 November 2014). Also, Syria Needs Analysis Project, Legal status of individuals fleeing Syria, June 2013. Available at: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal_status_of_individuals_fleeing_syria.pdf (last visited 11 November 2014).
4. UNHCR, The number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon passes the 1 million mark, 3 April 2014. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/533c1d5b9.html> (last visited 10 November 2014).
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