The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster
Disparities in Perceptions, Aspirations and Behaviour in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey

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Key points:

- History matters – much of the discrepancy between perceptions of refugees, host communities and policymakers can be linked to historical social ties and political relations.

- Context matters – humanitarian 'solutions' need to fit the Middle East context.

- The disparity in perceptions is especially pronounced in Lebanon and Jordan where the international humanitarian aid regime is most active.

- Turkey, working largely without outside humanitarian assistance, has been far more humane and practical in its approach.

- Lack of education opportunities is a major concern for refugee families.

Policy implications:

- Self-settlement is preferred to encampment.

- Temporary protection, not resettlement, is the main aspiration for refugees.

- Local community drop-in centres offering opportunities for non-formal education and training are needed.

- Access to education for Syria's youth needs to be widely operationalised.

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Introduction: the making and unmaking of a refuge state in Syria

In modern history, Syria and its peoples have experienced massive displacement. Between 1850 and 1950, Syria received several million forced migrants from the contested borderlands with the Imperial Russian and Ottoman Empires. Following the Crimean War (1853-56), and the two Ottoman-Russian Wars in the 1860s and 1880s, in excess of 3 million forced migrants from the Crimea, Caucasus and the Balkans entered the Ottoman provinces of Anatolia, with many continuing on to the Arab regions of Bilad al Sham (Greater Syria). The Ottoman administration established a special commission to address the needs of these ethnically varied, forcibly displaced people. The Commission (Muhacirin Komisyonu) set out generous terms for their resettlement, granting them some freedom of choice along the sparsely settled agricultural lands (Chatty, 2010). Great efforts were made to see them become quickly self-sufficient. Integration into Greater Syria's ethnically mixed settlements was encouraged.

Then, as World War One drew to a close as many as half a million Armenians found refuge in Syria among their co-religionists. When the modern Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, 10,000 Kurds fled to Syria to escape the forced secularism of Kemal Ataturk's new Turkey. In the 1930s, the Inter War French mandate over Syria saw waves of Assyrian Christians seek asylum and safety from Iraq. All these forced migrants were granted citizenship in the new Syrian state. Then in the late 1940s, Syria provided safe haven for over 100,000 Palestinians fleeing the 'Nakba' and the creation of the state of Israel.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the modern 'truncated' Syrian state, carved out of Greater Syria by the League of Nations in 1920 and granted full independence in 1946, was a place of refuge for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of ethno-religious minorities uprooted from their homelands as a result of war, of arbitrary lines drawn across maps, and ethno-sectarian strife. Even in the early 21st century, Syria admitted over a million Iraqi refugees, plus other refugees from Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, and Eritrea. The Arab and Syrian institution of hospitality and refuge meant that, until 2011, the humanitarian aid regime did not have to deal with a mass influx into Europe of Iraqi or other refugees from the Arab world.

Then, a decade into the 21st century, Syria disintegrated into extreme violence, triggering a displacement crisis of massive proportions.
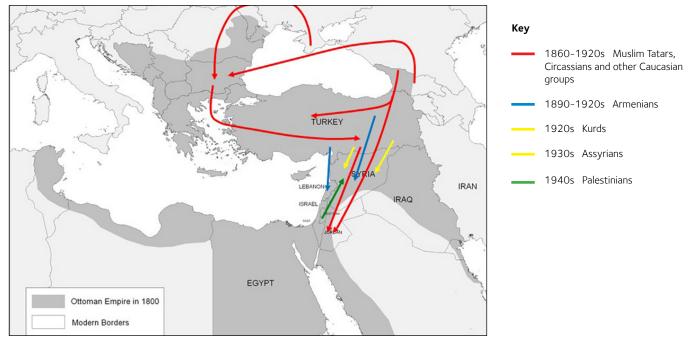
Figure 1. Map of 19th and 20th century forced migrations to Syria

The speed with which Syria emptied of nearly 20% of its population shocked the world and left the humanitarian aid regime struggling to respond to the displacement crisis on Syria's borders. Each country bordering on Syria has responded differently: Turkey set up its own refugee camps for those most vulnerable, but generally supported self-settlement; Lebanon refused to allow the international humanitarian aid regime to set up formal refugee camps; and Jordan prevaricated for nearly a year and then insisted upon the setting up of a massive United Nations refugee camp. Turkey and Lebanon have permitted Syrians to enter as temporary 'guests'; Jordan has refouled (returned) some, contrary to international norms. Lebanon and Jordan have not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, and although Turkey has signed the Convention, it has reserved its interpretation of it to apply only to Europeans seeking refuge/asylum in Turkey.

The UN estimates that over 60% of the Syrian refugee flow across international borders is self-settling in cities, towns and villages where they have social networks. In Turkey, most refugees are clustered in the southern region bordering Syria and circular migration in and out of the country is tolerated. Despite a general rejection of encampment among those fleeing, some 25-30% of the refugee flow is directed into camps. In Lebanon, informal settlements are proliferating, with accompanying patron-client relationships overcoming more participatory and transparent management of humanitarian aid. In Jordan, self-settled refugees from Syria found to be working 'illegally' are 'deported' into the UN managed refugee camps of Za'atari or Azraq, from where there is no escape other than paying to be 'sponsored' by a Jordanian or to be smuggled out to re-enter the liminal state of irregular status.

Mass influx contained regionally?

In neither Turkey, Lebanon nor Jordan have the displaced or the host communities been consulted. Discrepancies are rapidly becoming visible, and tensions and protests have quickly emerged among host communities, displaced Syrians and humanitarian policymakers. The current situation is unsustainable and is testing the humanitarian aid regime's preferred 'solution' of containing the crisis regionally. Without significant changes in policy and practice throughout the region, Syria's forced migrants will leave the region in search of protection elsewhere – indeed they are already doing so. Unable to work and provide their children with an education, they will move on, risking their lives in dangerous sea crossings and exhausting land marches, led by people smugglers.

The research

This study has sought: 1) to **understand the disparity in perceptions, aspirations, and behaviour of refugees from Syria, members of host communities, and practitioners in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon**; and 2) to **identify what measures, if any, are regarded as important by the three target communities for future return and reintegration in Syria when conditions permit**.

It involved multi-sited, 12-month qualitative and partici-patory research conducted between October 2014 and September 2015 in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and in English, with interpretation required only in Turkey when interviewing members of local communities. Purposive sampling and a snowballing technique were employed to identify participants, with representative-ness monitored. Participant observation was also employed.

The study initiated a consultative engagement between practitioners, representatives of host communities and the refugees themselves. It commenced with in-country recruit-ment of researchers in collaboration with the facilitating research institutions: the Swedish Institute of Istanbul in Turkey; the American University of Beirut (AUB) in Lebanon; and Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL) in Jordan. Fieldwork took place in October 2014 in Istanbul, Ankara and Gaziantep, Turkey; December 2014 in Beirut and the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon; and February 2015 in Amman and Irbid, Jordan. This included exploratory informal and focused discussions as well as semi-structured interviews with international and national practitioners, self-settled refugees and host community members, as well as refugees in camps.

A precarious containment policy: preliminary observations

Lebanon

Many Syrians in Lebanon displaced by the conflict do not feel that they are refugees. However, they sense growing social discrimination, especially in Beirut. They also express a fear that the Lebanese population associates them with a rise in crime. Many Syrians were not new to the country but had been working for many years in the construction and agriculture sectors. The continuing conflict has meant that many of the Syrian workers' wives and children fled Syria and joined their husbands in Lebanon. Those with jobs feared losing them once it were known that their families had joined them, contributing to the fear, distress, and isolation of many.

My husband came to Lebanon a long time ago, even before the war in Syria. He used to come over since he was 17… He used come and go, stay for a while [working as a carpenter] and then go back to Syria. In 2011 he was in Lebanon; then the situation was very bad in Syria, so I came to Lebanon… my husband had a job and we stayed at his boss's house. Back then I couldn't go back to Hama. My husband had no intention of bringing me to Lebanon, for him it was settled that he worked in Lebanon and I stayed in Syria. But after all the explosions in Hama, I couldn't protect my kids… My husband is always afraid he might be fired [if the children get into any trouble]. (Reem, Beirut, 2014)

Illegal curfews in over 40 municipalities have meant that many Syrians are afraid to go out at night, to work overtime or to mix in any way with the Lebanese population. For many of the skilled and unskilled Syrians in Lebanon, these curfews have meant that older children and adolescents are being pulled out of whatever schooling they had in order to work during daylight hours with their fathers.

My son should be in 9th grade, but he works in a supermarket now… people tell me that it is a waste that my son is not in school. He will have no future without education. But our situation is very bad, I really want to send him to school, but at the same time we are in deep need of his financial help. (Layla, Beirut, 2014)

In the Bekaa Valley, Syrians with no savings are accepting very low wages in order to provide their families with food. This has raised hostility among local Lebanese who see the Syrian workers as a threat to their own livelihoods, resulting in increased social discrimination and vigilantism.

Thus, despite their long association with Lebanon and often close kinship ties, many Syrians are feeling frightened and cut off from Lebanese society. Although a number of international, national and local NGOs operate in Beirut and in the Bekaa Valley to provide basic needs, there is little interaction with the host community. Very little evidence emerged from the interviews of host community involvement in any 'survival in dignity' activity on an individual basis; NGO activity was limited to more 'distant and distancing' charity work or local civil society efforts in Beirut organised by middle-class Lebanese and Syrians resident in the country. The UNHCR's very slow uptake of cash assistance to the most needy and vulnerable Syrians in Lebanon has resulted in large numbers of women and children begging on the streets of Beirut – something which is generally scorned by Lebanese.
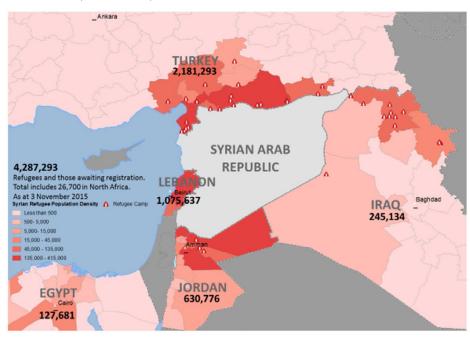
Jordan

Most Syrians regard Jordan's initial response to the humanitarian crisis and mass influx of people from the Der'aa region of Syria as open and generous. Most of these Syrians had kinship ties in Northern Jordan or well-established social networks. However, over time, the Jordanian government has restricted access to the country and actively prevented some from entering (unaccompanied male youth) or actually returned others (Palestinian refugees from Syria).

At the beginning you had a refugee crisis with a security component and it has become a security crisis with a refugee component. So in the early days it was "these are our brothers" and so the natural generosity has now given way to more suspicion about who these people are and the security card is played all the time now. (senior international practitioner, Amman, 2015)

A discrepancy between what is widely written about in the local press (the burden of Syrians on the Jordanian economy) and what policymakers and practitioners feel is actually occurring has emerged. Many policymakers feel that Syrians are contributing to the Jordanian economy much more than is widely reported. Some point to a recent United Nations report (cf ILO) suggesting that the unemployment rate has dropped

Figure 2. Map of Syrian refugee density and camp placements in border hosting countries, as at 3 November 2015 (Source: UNHCR)

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Source: http://data.unhcr.org

by 2% since the start of the Syrian crisis due to the surge in Syrian-owned factories opening (200) and the heavy employment of Jordanians (estimated at about 6,000). There is also widespread acknowledgement that Syrians are skilled workmen, especially carpenters.

While employment in the informal sector brings in much needed funding for Syrians, it creates stress. They are fearful of possible arrest as they have no work permits, even though they are largely replacing Egyptians, not Jordanians, in the work force.

Syrian refugees are skilled craftsmen, especially carpenters, we all know that. Jordanians are not skilled carpenters. Syrians are not taking jobs from Jordanians; but they may be taking jobs from Egyptians. They are working informally, but that puts a lot of stress on them because they can be arrested and deported if they are found out. (senior Jordanian policymaker, 2015)

Photo: Refugees from Damascus live in an abandoned prison in Sawiri, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. *Credit*: UNHCR / L Addario

There is some social discrimination levelled at Syrians in Jordan but it is muted compared with that in Lebanon. This may be associated with tribal custom and the requirement of hospitality to tribal kin and others in patron/client relationships (many Syrians from the Der'aa region are associated with the Beni Khalid tribal confederation also found in northern Jordan). Jordanians generally do recognise that the country benefits (from international aid) from its expenditure on refugees, and that a significant percentage goes into direct government projects to assist Jordanians – for example, a recent US–Jordanian bilateral announcement of $1b over 3 years for Jordanian infrastructure development and construction of 50 high schools for Jordanians.

Turkey

Syrians in Turkey come from a variety of backgrounds and social classes. Many Syrians are concerned with the negative imagery of 'dirty' and uncouth' Arabs, commonly articulated by middle-class Turks. Furthermore, many Syrians remarked that many Turks had difficulty differentiating between the general Syrian refugee population and the 'nawwar' (Gypsies). Gypsy communities in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria have been displaced by the Syrian crisis and are commonly seen begging on the streets of Istanbul and elsewhere. Largely unrecognised, the Gypsies of south west Asia have also seen their peripatetic and seasonal economy disrupted by the armed conflict in Iraq and Syria, and have gravitated to Turkey where they can survive in greater security.

Members of local Turkish hosting communities widely recognised the needs of Syrian refugees. The importance of the third sector - charitable organisations and religious/Sufi based associations - in providing assistance was acknowledged. But street begging was widely condemned by both host community members and Syrian refugees themselves.

I don't like to give money to beggars because it just encourages them. (Turkish practitioner, Istanbul, 2014)

Lack of communication and poor understanding of the situation of Syrians led to demonstrations, arrests and a dozen or so deaths in late 2014. Many Turkish citizens felt that more transparency by the government in terms of what Syrians were entitled to would have relieved the situation and growing discriminatory attitudes. Many thought that refugees from Syria were being given salaries by the Turkish government; others felt that Syrians were working for lower wages (as their Turkish employers did not have to pay taxes) and this was driving out the unskilled Turkish workers.

Widespread support from civil society was especially noticeable among established NGOs and religious organisations related to the Islamic Sufi sector of society (civil society rather than religious organisations). Neighbourhood public kitchens providing free meals and bread to the poor as well as refugees resident in the area were common in Istanbul and in Gazianteb.

My husband came first and then I joined him 8 months later with our baby. At first we went to Mersin, but my husband couldn't find a job. When we ran out of money we came to Gazianteb, because the Syrian Interim Government was here. We figured there would be more jobs here. So we came here and 2 months later we met this nice man who found a job for my husband and rented us these two rooms. Our neighbours gave us some mattress and a TV to watch Syrian television. There is also a mosque nearby where I go and the people there give me diapers for the baby, bread and daily hot meals as well as supplies of sugar, pasta and oil. (Hala, Gazianteb, 2014)

Lack of common language may have been a divide in other times, but in the present crisis, it seems to be more significant. For professionals and skilled workers it has meant the inability to work at their professions (especially doctors, and health care specialists, except when their training was outside of Syria and could be accredited), but in other cases, being 'very' different seems to have bred greater sympathy and general support at the local community level.

Conclusion

Across the board, what emerges is that history matters. Much of the discrepancy described here can be linked to historical social ties and political relations between Syria and Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, and Syria and Jordan. Disparity in perceptions between policymakers, practitioners, and host communities is widespread, but not equally so in the three countries.

In Lebanon, the consociational shape of governance and long period of time during this crisis in which there was in effect 'no government' led to a period of paralysis within the UN humanitarian aid system. Thus, effective relief programmes for the poorest and most vulnerable of Syrians started very late, resulting in an exponential rise in street begging and other 'negative' coping strategies (pulling young children out of school to work, moving into structures unfit for human habitation, and reliance on former agricultural 'gang' masters [shawish] to be the interface between the UN humanitarian relief system and refugees themselves). All these factors have resulted in significant social discrimination and an unwillingness or inability – at the local level – to help Syrians with basic health and education needs. The lack of education opportunities for nearly 50% of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon weighs heavily on the consciousness of their families.

In Jordan the majority of Syrian refugees are closely linked to the Jordanian population, especially in northern Jordan where close tribal ties are pronounced and where original refuge was granted with host families related either by blood or marriage. Jordanian sensitivity to the presence of Palestinian refugees from Syria has resulted in draconian surveillance to identify such refugees, a dragnet that often pulls in non-Palestinian refugees from Syria. Those found to be working 'illegally' are 'deported' across the border (if Palestinian refugees from Syria) or to Azraq or Za'atari camps, creating greater mistrust and suspicion of the host government by the refugees. Education opportunities are limited and many Syrian children are only able to attend second-shift schools with inferior curriculum and reduced hours. Some Syrians consider the situation in Jordan so dire that they are preparing to return to Syria rather than face what they consider 'inhuman conditions' any longer. In September 2015, Andrew Harper, the UNHCR senior humanitarian aid practitioner in Jordan reported that 200 Syrians were returning to Syria each day.

In Turkey, lessons learned have been more widely implemented in response to various critical events (demonstrations in October 2014) and widespread criticism of lack of transparency of the government. The camps set up by the Turkish emergency relief organisation (IFAD) ,starting in 2012 without the assistance of UN experts, and their camp templates have rightly been described as 5-star. These settlements are open – in that refugees may enter and leave on a daily basis. But absences of more than three weeks at a time are not tolerated as there is long waiting list of Syrian exiles.

Photo: Midyat refugee camp, Turkey. *Credit*: UNHCR / M Jaques

Although interviews in Turkey took place before the January 2015 domestic law announcement providing Syrians with formal IDs and temporary protection (including rights to health and education opportunities and permission to apply for work permits), it was clear that Turkey – of all three countries – was far more humane and practical in its approach to the mass influx of refugees; and this despite a language barrier that did not exist in Lebanon or Jordan. Social discrimination was at its least public expression and Sufi-based organisations were active in providing assistance at the local community level. Many members of such organisations expressed their belief that to provide refuge for the Syrians in their country was an obligation both religious and ethical. Much of their activity has permitted a form of local accommodation in Turkey which was not found in Lebanon or Jordan despite the closer linguistic and social ties. Social cohesion was strong – boding well for eventual local integration in Turkey or return to Syria as a 'friendly and supportive neighbouring state' – whatever political solution may finally emerge.

The disparity in perceptions among refugees, members of local host communities, and practitioners is especially pronounced in Lebanon and Jordan where the international humanitarian aid regime is the most active. The engagement of UN frameworks in creating an architecture of assistance is built upon templates developed over the past few decades, largely among agrarian and poor developing countries. Such policy and practice does not fit easily into the middle-income countries of the Eastern Mediterranean among a refugee population that is largely educated and middle-class. Without a serious effort to make the 'humanitarian 'solutions' fit the context of the Middle East, success will continue to be muted, at best, and damaging at worst.

It is ironic that Turkey, the one country which has not requested assistance from the United Nations Refugee Agency, seems to have managed the process of providing assistance without undermining refugee agency and dignity.

Largely working alone with local Turkish staff drawn from the Turkish civil service as well as the Disaster Management Unit of the Prime Minister's Office (AFAD) and the main quasi-official Turkish NGO (IHH), Turkey has managed the Syrian refugee crisis with sensitivity and concern.

The separate histories of Turkey and the countries of the Levant have obviously contributed to the disparities in perceptions, aspirations and behaviour among refugees, host community members, and practitioners in each of the three countries. The moderated engagement of the international humanitarian aid regime in Turkey but not in Lebanon and Jordan has also contributed to some of the disparities noted in this study. Global templates for humanitarian assistance built from experiences in very different contexts and among populations of significantly different make-up are not easily integrated into Middle Eastern concepts of refuge, hospitality, and charity. The close social ties and networks of Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan but not in Turkey (with the exception of the Hatay) have meant that the initial generosity of hosting among relatives in a wide social network has more rapidly given way to hostility and discrimination, in contrast to Turkey where the original hosting was based on a religious and ethical sense of duty to the stranger.

Policy implications

Many refugees and practitioners articulated steps which the international community could take to ameliorate conditions, halt a potential mass departure from the region, and create conditions on the ground for future return and reintegration in Syria.

It was clear to all that **self-settlement was preferred to encampment**. The former was seen as creating conditions for local accommodation and potentially a return and re-integration into Syria's many social communities. Lessons learned from Bosnia Herzegovina support this position (Blitz 2015).

Local community drop-in centres offering opportunities for non-formal education and technical training are needed. Skills development, psycho-social support and language instruction were regularly suggested as measures to help local accommodation and give a future to the current lost generation of youth. Lessons learned from UNHCR's drop-in centres established in Syria for Iraqi refugees were referred to as exemplary.

Education opportunities for Syria's youth have not been widely operationalised, despite numerous studies pointing to gaps in education opportunities, making the UN slogan 'No Lost Generation' no more than that – a slogan.

Temporary protection, not resettlement, is the main aspiration for those who have been forced to flee Syria – **to work and to educate their youth until such a time as they can return to Syria**. The temporary protection afforded to nearly 1.2 million Bosnians during the 1992–95 war in Europe is a good example of what European states can do again if they have the will.

The present situation is unsustainable. Lebanon and Jordan, and even Turkey, cannot sustain these numbers for much longer. Without a dramatic change in policy and programming, people will resort to mass flight from the region by any means necessary in order to secure survival in dignity – an opportunity to work, to feed and to educate their families until they can return to Syria – which they cannot access in the region.

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Cover photo: Syrian refugee children at Za'atari refugee camp, Jordan.
Credit: UNHCR / Jordi Matas.

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