

New Faces, Less Water, and a Changing Economy in a Growing City

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Irbid, Jordan

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Photos by the authors. Cover photo is a typical city street in southwestern Irbid with a mix of Syrian and Jordanian residences, shops, and pedestrians.

Location



Irbid is the third-most populous city in Jordan after Amman and Zarqa, having grown in density dramatically since the 1970s. The Palestinian camp, Al A'awdah, founded in the 1950s, is now just another neighborhood to the north of the city.



Irbid sits less than an hour's drive (30 km, 20 mi) from the city of Dara'a in southern Syria and the same distance from Jordan's Za'atari refugee camp, east past Al-Mafraq. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

For more background on Irbid and Jordan, continue to the appendices.

Executive Summary

This report explores how Syrian refugees have transformed the city of Irbid as the latest arrivals in a long history of forced migration to the city that has included Palestinians, Iraqis, Sudanese, and Somalis. We chose Irbid for three reasons: first, while Jordan's camps and capital city, Amman, are heavily represented in refugee research, the Middle East's other medium-sized cities like Irbid—that house the majority of the region's refugees—are underrepresented. Second, in addition to hosting refugees, Irbid is being transformed by major social, economic, and demographic changes similar to other urban areas around the world, providing a valuable case study for understanding refugee integration more broadly. Third, the authors have a deep and broad set of connections in Irbid that gave access to a wide range of local perspectives.

This report finds that refugee-host relations have ebbed and flowed, from welcoming in 2012, to anxiety about scarcity and security in 2016, to a more relaxed tolerance and sense of mutual ownership of Irbid's neighborhoods today as both groups become accustomed to one another. While social attitudes between Syrians and Jordanians are important, we also find that the arrival of Syrian refugees is only one part of a much larger set of trends that are affecting life in the city and affecting the ability of new arrivals to integrate here. These trends include rapid depletion of regional water resources, increased urbanization and its associated social changes, and shifting job opportunities for refugees, Jordanians, and other migrants as Jordan modernizes and globalizes its economy. We argue that the future of life in Irbid, and its ability to host new arrivals, will depend on how Jordanians and Syrians alike adapt to a new sedentary, urbanized lifestyle; how economically equitable and accessible cities can be to new arrivals in a globalizing, developing economy; and how the region can adapt to severe water scarcity. Many of these challenges can be managed with effective urban planning, but there has been a shortage of coordination between humanitarian, municipal, and development actors in Irbid.

Throughout the report, we unpack these complex forces that are transforming the city and lives of its residents, going into detail about how refugees, Jordanians, and other migrants experience and are transforming Irbid's housing stock, society and culture, water and wastewater systems, education system, healthcare system, security and public safety, transportation system, international humanitarian space, and economy. We share the voices of average refugees and Jordanians themselves, rather than relying on top-down views from government and humanitarian agencies' perspectives. Finally, we build on our understanding of refugee integration in urban areas by linking individual experiences, neighborhood- and city-level changes, and transnational trends.

Introduction

With the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2012, headlines fixated on shocking images of the 200,000-resident Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan. Meanwhile, an hour’s drive down the road, the city of Irbid was quickly becoming a new home to hundreds of thousands more Syrians who—in many neighborhoods—soon outnumbered Jordanians. Many of these Syrian arrivals met up with distant Jordanian relatives in Irbid, building on tribal and familial connections that existed throughout the region from before the modern border lines were drawn in the 20th century. Soon, these initial arrivals were joined by other Syrian cousins, siblings, and friends. Rapidly and without central management, much of the city was transformed:¹ apartment buildings and former student dorms filled with Syrians, many of the city’s neighborhoods blossomed with shops and restaurants referencing the “Free Syrian” opposition, and numerous streets across the city took on the look and feel of Dara’a, Syria.

As the city was changing, Jordanian residents worked to maintain their hospitality toward Syrians amidst growing anxieties about how their economically stressed and resource-poor city would continue to provide housing, jobs, medical services, education, water, and security to all of its residents. All of this change in Irbid is only the most recent episode in a much longer history of migration and change in the city; the historical migration has included Iraqis, Palestinians, global economic migrants, and rural Jordanians who began flocking to Irbid city when Yarmouk University was founded in the mid-1970s. However, unlike the previous large-scale arrival of Palestinians, the current large-scale arrival of Syrians is occurring amidst three other megatrends: dwindling water resources, rapid urbanization (including the social changes that come with it), and a globalizing and modernizing national economy. This report argues that the future of refugee integration in Irbid has less to do with the typical points of concern—competition for jobs and social relations between nationalities—and more to do with the underlying megatrends shaping Irbid, and many other cities around the world. In this sense, while Irbid is a relatively obscure city, it provides an excellent case study for understanding the challenges of refugee integration in other developing areas that are also experiencing urbanization, economic

University Circle, Irbid



“University Circle” was once mostly Jordanian college students but is now home to thousands of Syrian family residences and workplaces.

¹ Very similarly to the city of Ramtha, which was transformed even more pervasively by Syrian immigration in the same timeframe.

transition, and natural resource scarcity. This report also contributes knowledge about refugees in Jordan outside of camps like Za’atari, and away from the capital, Amman, where Western researchers have had easy access and focused much of their work.² The report also adds a local context, drawing attention to differences between neighborhoods, rather than treating the entire city or the whole country as a single unit. Finally, our report shares the experiences of Jordanians, refugees, and other migrants as heard in their *own voices*, rather than the official statements of key informants from foreign aid agencies or national ministries.

A Note on Terminology

Defining “Integration” in the Context of Jordan

“Integration” is a sensitive term in Jordan. It carries the assumption that refugees will become permanent residents of Jordan, harkening back to challenges integrating Palestinians, which reached a boiling point with the 1970 Black September incident when the Palestine Liberation Organization led militant action against the ruling Hashemites. Fieldworkers in Jordan are encouraged to use the term “social cohesion,” which is more politically comfortable for the Jordanian government yet is poorly defined. To avoid these politicized terms in interviews, we used the term *ailaqat*, or “relations,” between refugees and Jordanians, because it is a clearer, less abstract term that does not carry the political baggage of literal terms for integration, such as *tkamel* or *twaheed*. For this report, we define “integration” in Jordan as *de facto* integration,³ not *de jure* integration, meaning the day-to-day activities that build connectivity between refugees and the city—like finding informal work, apartments, or making friends—even if official policy does not support long-term “local integration” as defined by the United Nations (UN).

Defining “Refugees” in the Context of Jordan

In Arabic, the translation of “refugee” is straightforward (*alajaiien*), but the idea of refuge in Jordan is more deeply rooted in the Prophet’s experience taking refuge in Medina in the year 622⁴ than in the 1951 Geneva Convention, which is a largely Western construct.⁵ The term refugee in the Arab world also carries sociopolitical associations with particular groups and conflicts, especially the Palestinians in 1948 and 1967. Also problematically, among the Syrians we spoke with, the Arabic term for refugee was sometimes considered demeaning, and Syrians preferred to call themselves migrants or guests, or to refer to themselves simply as “Syrian” or “from Hama” without any “refugee” designator.⁶ Further,

² Noting the overwhelming majority—some 547,000 out of a total of 673,000 Syrians in Jordan—live outside of camps, and that the majority—roughly 471,000—live outside of Amman Governorate, while in Irbid, Mafraq, and other non-capital cities, refugees’ experiences are different from these other parts of the country. See [UNHCR Operational Portal](#).

³ See Jacobsen, 2001. “De facto” integration is defined as the efforts on the ground of refugees to become functionally connected to their new country and city. “De jure” integration is a legal pathway as defined by governments and humanitarian agencies connected to the “local integration” durable solution. [More discussion is available from RIT’s literature review on the topic](#).

⁴ The Prophet arrived in Medina in 622 seeking refuge and to moderate disputes between warring factions in the Arabian peninsula.

⁵ Brand, 2010: 106. [More on the Geneva Convention](#) is available here.

⁶ However, this preference is not universal. Some Syrians appreciate the title “refugee” and see it as protective.

most Syrians in Jordan are not registered as refugees, so the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regularly refers to “persons of concern” rather than “refugees.”

Because we did not usually ask if they were registered or not and because of the aforementioned cultural sensitivities, in this report we try use national designations for Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and Sudanese residents of Irbid regardless of their refugee or legal status. In cases where that legal status would have a direct consequence on the phenomenon we are describing, we specify with additional terms. We refer to Asian, Egyptian, and other nationalities as “migrants,” since their residency status is typically as an economic migrant, although some may have been forcibly displaced. We refer to aid workers as Western “migrants” to draw attention to power imbalances in Jordan’s migration policies between Western and non-Western immigrants.⁷

Defining Irbid

For the purposes of this report, “Irbid” will specifically describe Irbid city, the roughly 10 km (5 mi)-wide urban space that is the capital of Irbid Governorate. Jordanians and Syrians alike will often describe themselves as living in “Irbid” if they are from anywhere in this northern governorate, even the rural towns and villages far from Irbid city’s center. However, because this project is focused on urban refugees, we constrain our scope to Irbid city unless otherwise noted.

⁷ See [von Koppenfels, A. \(2014\). Migrants or expatriates? US citizens as a migrant group. *Migration Policy Practice* \[Online\] IV:16-19.](#)

Methods

This report is based on a desk review; conversations and interviews with refugees, Jordanians, and other migrants; participant observation; and mapping of the city of Irbid.

Desk Review

We reviewed the research on refugees and Irbid in English and Arabic, including reports from practitioners and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), statistical data published by UNHCR,⁸ and a national survey on Jordanian public opinion about hosting Syrians conducted by Yarmouk University.⁹

Interviews

Charles spent two months in Irbid in 2016 and again in 2018. In 2016, he was part of a research team that interviewed 22 Syrian refugees.¹⁰ In 2018, Charles spoke about integration with 14 Syrian refugees (12 men, 2 women; ages 25–65), 17 Jordanians (13 men, 4 women; ages 20–60), 3 Palestinians (all men; middle aged), 2 Egyptians (men, middle aged), 2 Thai economic migrants (men, middle aged), and 2 Malay students (both young males). Agyead has lived in Irbid and the nearby city of Jerash since 2016. He works regularly for aid organizations and conducts interviews for news media. In 2018, Agyead provided Syrian perspectives from 38 Syrians (26 men, 12 women) aged 20 to 55. Agyead is in contact with many of them in his daily life and in his line of work as a journalist. Both authors interviewed key informants or took part in meetings with numerous INGOs and academic institutions.¹¹

Observation

Charles and Agyead took ethnographic notes on life in the city from restaurants, shops, gyms, soccer fields, cafes, shisha bars,¹² video game cafes, education centers, historic sites, transportation hub stations, aid organization offices, and the city's streets.

Mapping

We used Humanitarian Data Exchange and Google maps of Irbid's services locations, to which we added points of interest by walking through the city and recording GPS locations. Using a Yarmouk University study from the 1980s as a baseline and Google Time Machine, we developed a time-lapse view of how services and population density have changed in the past 30 years. We also identified neighborhoods where refugees reside based on observations during walks and conversations with experts and our network. We did not request UNHCR residency data or record addresses of refugees

⁸ [UNHCR, 2019](#).

⁹ Arabic language survey from Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani (2016). English translations available on request from the authors.

¹⁰ Findings published in Mandić & Simpson, 2017; Abrahms, Sullivan & Sullivan, 2017; Sullivan & Simpson, 2016.

¹¹ These included UNHCR's Jordan office in Khalda, MENA office in Amman, USAID, the World Bank, WANA, UN Women, SWISS Development, ILO, NRC, ACTED, and REACH. We also spoke with academics and researchers from Yarmouk University, SOAS, EUI, Northeastern University, Maastricht University, NYU Abu Dhabi, and Harvard University.

¹² Also known as hookah, arguila, nargila, or "hubbly-bubbly."

for two reasons: 1) safety and ethical concerns; and 2) because numerous interviews suggested refugees' registered addresses are rarely accurate.¹³

Limitations

Jordanian and Syrian societies have strong gender norms, including who works what jobs, how men and women can interact socially, and who can migrate. As male researchers we were not able to interview as many females as males, so this report is mostly about male experiences. Our Refugees in Towns research team in Amman consists of all women (an American, a Jordanian, and a Sudanese Egyptian) and through conversations with us, they provided valuable and different perspectives about how gender affects integration in Jordan's cities.

Al Abrar, Irbid



A typical neighborhood in southwestern Irbid now houses more Syrians than Jordanians, with both nationalities working in barbershops, cafes, grocery stores, and other businesses up and down the street.

¹³ During their registration process on arrival in Jordan, refugees give a temporary address—usually the address where their friends, family, or relatives let them stay when they first arrive until they can find their own apartment— but this address is never updated because of the time and effort required to do so. Of the 36 Syrian refugees we asked about registration, only 2 thought UNHCR had accurate residential data about them. Our conversations with UNHCR enumerators revealed that when they try to find respondents, listed addresses are rarely correct, and they are redirected by locals after arriving at the wrong address.

The Authors' Positions in Irbid and Experiences Researching this Case

Jordan is one of the most heavily researched refugee-hosting countries in the world because of its security, ease of access, and openness to foreigners asking questions. Working in the humanitarian research space in Jordan involves constantly brushing shoulders with visiting Western researchers, aid workers, and students. These visitors have produced countless studies, surveys, visual projects, documentary films, advocacy papers, blogs, and photo journals about the plight of refugees in Jordan, especially in the over-researched Za'atari camp and the easily accessible capital city of Amman. Many of these studies have a critical role at the national and regional level informing policy, programming, and helping aid organizations and governments to make the most of limited resources being allocated to so many people in need.

However, ever since his first foray into refugee research in Jordan in 2015, Charles was struck by the discrepancies between the way refugees are portrayed on spreadsheets in air-conditioned offices and the actual *lived experiences* of refugees and Jordanians in the streets, apartments, and markets outside humanitarian organization compounds.

Agyead, a Syrian national, arrived in Irbid in 2013 and has since become a fixer for aid workers, journalists, and academics who need a knowledgeable and well-connected expert to guide them through the Syrian refugee population in Jordan, as well as the Jordanian bureaucracy. He has become an expert not only from his connections but also from his personal experiences living in Irbid, Jerash, and Amman, navigating Jordan's job market, finding apartments, and negotiating the country's higher education system to attain a diploma.

When Charles met him in a bright pink shisha café in Irbid in 2018, Agyead was working at a Jordanian news station as a journalist and teaching an American academic his Dara'a dialect of Arabic. As we talked over *lemon b'nana* smoothies in the café, we found we had a shared vision of a gap between the international perspective on Jordan's refugees—distant, unresponsive, and inaccessible to average Syrians and Jordanians—and the way Syrians and Jordanians are experiencing integration in their neighborhoods. We strove to produce an original report, despite the heavily saturated body of refugee research taking place in Jordan, sharing views on how residents of Irbid actually experience integration day to day, as a complement to the more generalized studies conducted by aid agencies and academics at the national or regional level. Both Agyead and Charles' personal experiences in Irbid are included in the report as illustrations of broader themes identified by our interviews and observations. After Charles left Jordan in July 2018, Agyead continued his journalism work in Amman and Irbid Governorate, and they coordinated with WhatsApp and email.

We would also like to note that in our experiences, when foreigners tell Jordanians that they are working with Syrian refugees, they are often asked whether they have been listening to Jordanian voices too, or just to Syrian ones. We therefore present the viewpoints of numerous Jordanians whom we have gotten to know closely over the years. Charles' deepest insights come from years of connection with one particular family, the Zannads, part of the Bani Issa tribe, who have been rooted in Irbid since before Jordan was a modern state.

Waves of Urban Transformation

Agyead arrived in Amman in 2013 by plane and then took a bus to Irbid. He was one person in a much larger wave of Syrian arrivals to Irbid and part of a long history of urbanization that the headlines about the “Syrian refugee crisis” do not reveal. Irbid has experienced five major periods of immigration since 1950 that have transformed it from a dusty village to a bustling medium-sized city:

1951–1976: Palestinian refugees came to the Irbid Refugee Camp.¹⁴ Over time, 4,000 Palestinian residents developed their camp with concrete structures such that it “now resembles some of the urban quarters in Irbid.”¹⁵ Beginning in 1953, these Palestinians were joined by Jordanian farmers who trickled into Irbid seeking better incomes than the countryside could provide.¹⁶

1976–1990: The establishment of Yarmouk University created an anchor institution to which Jordanians flocked from across the country. When youth came to Irbid city to start classes, often their whole family would move with them to stay in one household. Parents and siblings found work in construction, sold goods to other urbanizing migrants, or brought their previously rural manufacturing or agricultural/pastoral jobs with them to the city.

1990–2012: Urbanizing Jordanians were joined by thousands of refugees from many other countries, including Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan, as well as thousands of economic migrants from Egypt, South and Southeast Asia, and Western migrants from the United States and Europe.¹⁷ The city continued to grow, largely without central planning.

2012–2015: The outbreak of the Syrian civil war brought around 400,000 refugees to Irbid.¹⁸ During the early years of the conflict, many Syrians simply drove across the border in packed cars, often joining distant relatives or tribal connections that have existed across the region from before the modern border was drawn in the 20th century. As the Syrian conflict wore on, the border tightened, and Syrians began to rely on smugglers to transport them to the border, where they were met by Jordanian security forces. After passing through the border, Syrians dispersed throughout the country, usually beginning in the camps and then leaving to join extended family or friends in Jordan’s cities. Within Irbid city, many Syrians chose to settle in the same apartment buildings or neighborhoods as the relatives or friends they had known back in Syria, creating clusters that became the epicenters for establishing Syrian restaurants and shops.¹⁹ By 2015, Syrians outnumbered Jordanians in many of Irbid’s neighborhoods.²⁰

¹⁴ Over time, Palestinians in Jordan have branched into groups with different rights depending on the year of their arrival and whether their Palestinian ethnicity descent is matrilineal or patrilineal, among other factors. Discussion on Palestinian integration to Jordan is beyond the scope of this report, but interested readers are referred to [UNRWA. \(2019\). Where We Work: Jordan.](#)

¹⁵ [UNRWA. \(2018\). “Irbid Camp.”](#)

¹⁶ Al-kheder *et al.*, 2009.

¹⁷ UNHCR, “Fact Sheet Jordan,” 2018.

¹⁸ Because much of this migration was informal and most of these Syrians are unregistered, exact figures are not known.

¹⁹ Similar to the transformation of Ramtha, which by 2014 had come to resemble Dara’a because of its density of Syrian residents.

²⁰ Bani Mustafa, 2017. Estimating the number of Syrians in Jordan is highly political. Government ministries have an incentive to over-estimate to increase foreign aid/development revenue. UNHCR claims only 98,000 Syrian “persons of concern” in Irbid

2015–present: The closing of Jordan’s border with Syria slowed the growth rate of Irbid’s refugee population. New arrivals in Irbid today mostly come from Jordan’s refugee camps, heading to the cities to find work, better housing, and to escape the “zoo” or “prison” of the camps.²¹ Since March 2013, the number of refugees in camps has declined, and the number in cities has doubled.²² Meanwhile, population growth of the city has continued as rural Jordanians and economic migrants move to the city for university study or jobs.

Since 2015, population growth in Irbid has slowed, but the city is still adapting to new demands on its infrastructures—especially water and housing—and its services, especially education and healthcare. Today, the primary challenges with integration reported by refugees in Irbid are financial stress,²³ feelings of exile, and limited or harmful social relations.²⁴ Jordanians report feeling financial stress, discomfort with a new urban lifestyle, and limited social relations with newcomers.²⁵ It is difficult to discern to what extent these stresses are being caused by the latest arrival of refugees versus much deeper trends like population growth, water scarcity, and macroeconomic changes impacting the city of Irbid.

The Urban Impact

Urban transformation occurs in two directions: the city affects the ability of newly arriving populations to integrate, and immigrating populations affect the makeup of the city. The city of Irbid in 2012 had several urban features that have facilitated Jordanian-Syrian integration. These include:

- Close spatial proximity of residences between Jordanians and Syrians, economic diversity of neighborhoods, and typically good relations between neighbors;
- Generally similar language and culture shared by Syrians and Jordanians;
- A long history of cross-border movement and trade as well as a robust informal economy that has provided livelihoods to Syrians, Jordanians, and other migrants alike.

However, several other urban features of Irbid have presented obstacles to Jordanian-Syrian integration. These include:

- The lack of popularly used public spaces;
- Overburdened and nationally segregated schools, coupled with a widespread lack of faith in the education system by both Jordanian and Syrian students;
- Subtle but distinguishable features between Syrians and Jordanians that allow for social prejudice;

city (UNHCR, 2016), down from a peak of 125,000 in 2014 (Stevens, 2016). However, their data are likely an underestimation as not all Syrians in Jordan register or interact with UNHCR. The total population of Irbid city today is also not known. The last census occurred in 2015, putting the population at some 502,000 people (City Population, 2017).

²¹ Terms commonly used in our conversations with Syrians in Irbid when asked what they thought of the camps.

²² Healy & Tiller, 2013.

²³ “Social stress” includes a spectrum of experiences, from feeling discriminated against to being assaulted.

²⁴ Alfadhli & Drury, 2018.

²⁵ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

- Jordanian fears that Syrians bring security risk and reciprocal Syrian feelings of sometimes being discriminated against by Jordan's security services;
- Jordanian labor and finance laws that assuage nativist Jordanian fears of migrants stealing jobs but limit Syrian participation in highly-skilled sectors distract from Jordan's macroeconomic problems and push Syrian investment away from Irbid and toward other neighboring countries.

While Syrian refugees have been arriving, the city of Irbid and the lives of its residents have been transforming. According to a national survey of Jordanians,²⁶ these major changes are generally blamed on the arrival of Syrian refugees. However, it is unclear to what extent these transformations are being caused by Syrian refugees versus other underlying social, economic, demographic, and ecological shifts. These changes include:

- Widespread un- and underemployment. According to a national survey, a majority of Jordanians believe this problem is exacerbated by Syrians stealing jobs.²⁷ Our findings suggest decades of structural economic reforms and globalizing market forces are more significant causes that impact both Syrians and Jordanians;
- Dwindling feelings of community and social connections. Jordanians often perceive this decline in social connectivity and sense of belonging as stemming from Syrian refugees "taking over" the city.²⁸ Our findings suggest this is in part a function of new Syrian arrivals changing the social landscape of the city but is also in large part simply an expression of urbanization: both Jordanians and Syrians who have recently moved from a rural area to the city lament the loss of a rustic lifestyle that has been replaced by a more socially disconnected, anonymous, and isolated way of life that is endemic in modern cities around the world;²⁹
- Severely diminishing water availability. Jordanians widely believe this shortage is being exacerbated by increased consumption because of Syrians,³⁰ but evidence suggests this shortage is overwhelmingly caused by depletion of rivers and aquifers from neighboring countries coupled with domestic population growth in Jordan;
- Rising healthcare costs and longer wait times at hospitals. This is perceived by many Jordanians as an effect of Syrian refugees taking up healthcare resources.³¹ Our findings suggest these changes are the result of decades of healthcare service supply not keeping pace with domestic population growth in the city coupled with rising rates of preventable diseases associated with the sedentary lifestyle and calorie-rich diet of a modern, urbanized lifestyle;
- An overwhelmed road network and increased traffic. This is often blamed on Syrian refugees,³² but our time-lapse mapping and interviews suggest the problem has more to do with a lack of any central urban planning, increased population density in the city over the course of decades,

²⁶ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

²⁷ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

²⁸ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

²⁹ Documented in the landmark work by Putnam, 2001. Residents of modern cities have higher rates of social isolation and accompanying mental health issues than those living in rural areas; see Gruebner *et al.*, 2017.

³⁰ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

³¹ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

³² Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

increasing car ownership among Jordanians since the 1900s,³³ and the lack of a public transit system.

The following sections aim to unpack these complex factors that are transforming the city of Irbid and affecting the integration of refugees, Jordanians, and other migrants.

Residential Neighborhoods and Housing

Long-time Jordanian residents of Irbid said the presence of Syrians has brought new liveliness to Irbid's residential areas. Before 2012, Jordanians we spoke to remember the city being mostly quiet at night, except for perhaps around major junctions like University Circle. But now in many previously hushed residential neighborhoods, televisions blare, children play in the alleys, and music floats through the air. People have mixed feelings about this change. Young people tended to say they liked this new vitality, but one 25-year-old Jordanian man who grew up in Irbid city lamented, "It was a paradise here, seven years ago. Growing up we had this nice house, but now we can't sell it. People come here, and they see it surrounded by all of this [pointing at the Syrian-occupied apartments], all of these people [Syrian residents], and why would they move here? These people [Syrians], they never sleep! They're up all night, all this noise, and the kids running everywhere!"

The residential layout of Irbid presents a mix of obstacles and opportunities for integration. The spatial proximity of refugee and Jordanian residences allows the development of new social connections between neighbors; however, refugee cash assistance coupled with a growing urban population may have caused an increase in rental costs across the city, leading to hostility from Jordanians toward Syrians, who are blamed for these costs increases.³⁴

Although some apartment buildings in Irbid are entirely one nationality, usually they house a mix of Jordanians, Syrians, and other migrants. Even though apartments are separated by thin walls, in many cases residents never speak to one another beyond greetings. Whether or not a refugee knew their Jordanian neighbors seemed more to do with personality than proximity. Outgoing, gregarious Syrians tended to know many neighbors, while introverted or shy Syrians did not, regardless of where they lived or the design and layout of their apartment building. "I've never even met my neighbor," was a common refrain used by Syrians to illustrate their feelings of social isolation in Irbid. For the many

Agyead's experience with neighbors

The Jordanian communities in Irbid and Jerash* are known for the friendliness of neighbors. When I was hospitalized due to illness, a group of Jordanian neighbors came to support me. They also cared for me after I left the hospital and visited several times to check up on me even though I did not live alone in the house. That was in addition to their constant interest in me and my Syrian flat mate, who later immigrated to Norway.

- Agyead Abo Zayed

* Jerash is a town 35 minutes north of Irbid.

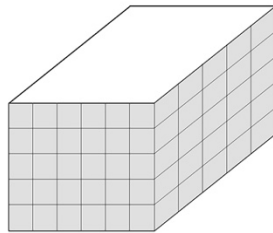
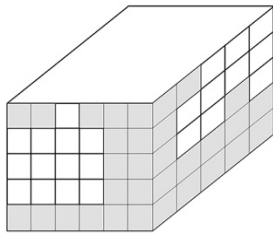
³³ Al-Sahili & Aboul-Ella, 1992; [Jordan Strategy Forum 2016](#).

³⁴ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

Syrians we spoke with, spatial integration did not necessarily bring social integration.

Of the Syrians and Jordanians whom we spoke with, both groups claimed to be able to perceive whether an apartment was being rented by a Jordanian or a Syrian family just by looking at the exterior (see images below). According to Syrians we spoke with, Jordanians tend to keep blinds closed and the exterior very plain, which was ascribed in one conversation as stemming from Bedouin or peasant ideals that see minimalism as cleanliness. By contrast, both Syrians and Jordanians we spoke with described Syrians' housing décor as being marked by hanging clothes to dry outside windows, filling balconies with furniture and toys, and keeping window shutters open to let in the light. Both Syrian and Jordanian onlookers remarked that during the day, cloth curtains being used to block the sunlight suggested a Syrian resident, while a heavy metal pull-down grating over the windows indicated a Jordanian resident.³⁵

In the apartment buildings that are entirely rented by Syrians that we observed, residents all knew each other and shared responsibilities for daily tasks: old men often working as *bowab* (a doorman/security



When asked to guess the nationality of the inhabitants in each apartment of a residential building, a Syrian observer guessed the layout on the left (Jordanian tenants in white, Syrian in grey) while a Jordanian observer guessed the layout on the right. They based this guess solely on the decorations in windows and balconies, but both were very confident in their estimations: "I am sure I am right," said the Jordanian.

We did not try to verify the results, and this is purely anecdotal, but these differences in viewpoints seem to suggest three things: 1) both nationalities seem to find comfort in the belief that they can see physical partitions between nationalities, whether these partitions are real or imagined; 2) Syrians appear to have more precision in their ability to discern national differences, perhaps since there is a social benefit to being able to present one's identity as more Syrian or more Jordanian depending on context; and 3) Jordanians seem more apt to see evidence of neighborhoods being taken over completely by Syrians without seeing complex national diversity on city blocks or in apartment buildings.

guard),³⁶ while couples or older women watch other families' children during the day. Often the

³⁵ Based on our conversations during neighborhood walks in Irbid. Of course, these generalizations are not always true, but suggest a desire to be able to visibly discern spatial boundaries between national groups, whether indicators of these boundaries are real or imagined.

³⁶ These men spend all day sitting by the door on plastic chairs, sometimes in pairs, chatting and watching the street. They know everyone who comes and goes and have a sharp eye for any unfamiliar faces.

residents of these buildings knew of each other from before they were displaced, sometimes coming from the same neighborhood or block back in Syria.

One aspect of Irbid's residential layout that promotes integration is the diversity of income levels in the city's neighborhoods. With the one exception of Jadeed—the new neighborhood on the edge of the city where UNHCR's Irbid offices are located and the only dominantly high-cost neighborhood of the city—every neighborhood of Irbid has a mix of high-end houses alongside low-cost apartment buildings and non-residential spaces.³⁷ This layout comes from lax building codes and lack of property development speculators. As a result, a wide range of economic strata are spatially proximate to refugees day-to-day, not just the poor. In many of the world's refugee-hosting cities, migrants are clustered in low-income neighborhoods among low-income hosts, resulting in impoverished peri-urban enclaves.³⁸

An Affordable Housing Crisis?

Jordanians widely believe that Syrians have caused rents to increase in Irbid, creating an affordable housing crisis.³⁹ Young Jordanians report have trouble getting married because they cannot get a house, a cultural prerequisite to marriage.⁴⁰ Some newlyweds have to move to the city's periphery where rents are lower.



A typical Irbid street, with low- and middle-income apartments (solid red and yellow) mixed with middle-income (yellow-hashed), high income (green-hashed), and non-residential buildings (grey). In most of Irbid, low- and middle-income Syrian refugees are not concentrated in enclaves but share space in economically diverse neighborhoods.

Base map imagery © Google 2019.

Jordanian realtors describe a 300% increase in apartment rental demand since 2010, but Syrians only comprise 10% of the housing market,⁴¹ and landlords also said demand for housing has increased only slightly with the refugee arrivals from 2012–2014. These data suggest that the changes in rental prices are likely caused more by urbanization and development than by the arrivals of refugees. Many Syrians

³⁷ Irbid does not have publicly available housing data, so our confidence in our findings is limited because we base these conclusions on observations and interviews with landlords and renters.

³⁸ As an example, see [Sudanese and Somali refugee enclaves in Cairo in our RIT report](#).

For another example in the West, see Cambodian refugees in New York City's "hyperghetto" in Tang, 2015. For academic discussion of the enclave effect, see Xie & Gough, 2012.

³⁹ Public poll, Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁴⁰ Public poll, Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁴¹ Alafi & Alfawaer, 2014.

have returned to Dara'a, traveled to Europe, or migrated elsewhere, and rental prices have declined from their 2014 peak, but only slightly.

Syrians we spoke with listed rent as their largest single monthly expense. Some have adapted by renting an apartment in lower-cost Mafraq, where they stay on weekends, and staying with friends in Irbid during the week while they work long days. Some Syrians said they had heard rumors that landlords avoid renting to Syrians because they believe Syrians “ruin the buildings.” But the landlords I [Charles] spoke with said such beliefs about prejudice were nonsense—they would rent to anyone who could pay and knew that the cash stipends registered Syrians receive make them more reliable renters, a finding supported by a Jordanian survey of landlords.⁴²

This suggests the increases in rental costs may have as much to do with the infusion of cash from international aid organizations as the presence of refugees alone: registered refugees receive monthly INGO cash assistance, most of which goes to rent.⁴³ Exploitative landlords know about this cash stipend and will rent apartments to Syrians at triple their fair market value. Jordanians then find themselves outbid. While additional research is needed, it is possible that without international cash assistance inflating rental costs, prices could decline for both refugees and low-income Jordanians. Another solution to the affordable housing crisis could be constructing more housing. Construction is cheap in Irbid, and Syrians regularly work in construction alongside other migrant workers, providing livelihoods. House and

Agyead's Experience Finding an Apartment in Irbid

After a few days of searching for an apartment in Irbid, I [Agyead] rented a small studio in a student dormitory near Al-Naseem Street near University Circle. The apartment reminded me of my university accommodation in Syria. After that, I felt stable here in Jordan and prepared myself to join Jerash University, which I had enrolled in before traveling to Jordan. Since my university was outside of the city, I would commute there daily. In June 2013, I moved to another house in Irbid close to Jamal Circle with a friend from Syria.

Charles' Experience Finding an Apartment in Irbid

Finding an apartment was easy. A Jordanian friend with *wasta* (personal connections) found an affordable apartment for me near Yarmouk University. Like many in the neighborhood, the building had previously catered entirely to university students, but by 2018, only one apartment on my floor was occupied by Jordanian students. The rest were rented by Syrian families who would often have friends over at night, leaving their doors ajar so kids could run in and out. All were friendly and had amiable relationships with the building manager who acted respectfully to Jordanian and Syrian residents alike. The building was owned by a wealthy Jordanian. Maintenance workers were Jordanian, mostly *reefee* (rural folks) who lived in surrounding villages but came into the city for work.

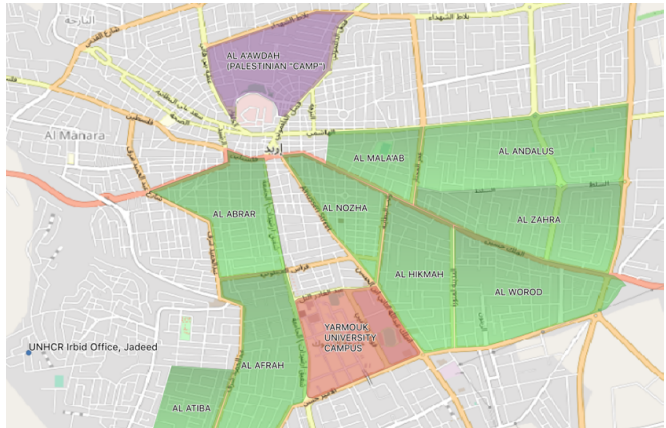
⁴² Alafi & Alfawaeer, 2014.

⁴³ Alafi & Alfawaeer, 2014.

apartment construction is already on the rise: in 2010, 800 units were built and in 2013, 1,700 units were built.⁴⁴ However, this is nowhere near enough to meet the growing demand from Jordanians and Syrians.

From a House to a Home

When I [Agyead] arrived in 2013 I was struck by a feeling of familiarity and belonging. I did not initially feel like a stranger because there is a lot of similarity in the Arabic dialects and in norms for dealing with others between Jordan and southern Syria.⁴⁵ Even the booking system for the bus that took me to Irbid was familiar. I felt like I had lived in this place before. Another Syrian young man remarked how much it reminded him of Damascus: “Everything is like Syria, the way women tie their hijabs, the way people hang clothes out the windows to dry, the jasmine on the apartment buildings’ gates.” Smell is the strongest receptor of memory and elicits powerful feelings of belonging,⁴⁶ so could a jasmine garden mean more to a refugee’s sense of belonging than a cash stipend?



Syrians have dispersed across Irbid’s southern and western neighborhoods where there is an abundance of middle- and low-income apartments (green), many of which were formerly student housing for Yarmouk University (red). These neighborhoods are distant from the only dominantly high-income neighborhood, Jadeed, in the southwestern city outskirts. Jadeed is where the UNHCR offices are located. Palestinians now live dispersed across the city: Al A’awdah “camp” is just another neighborhood to the north of the city (purple). Base map imagery from OpenStreetMap 2019.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have lived for six years or more now in Irbid, and they have begun taking ownership of urban residential spaces, adding to and improving them. In 2019 compared to 2016, Syrian apartment buildings appear to be a little better off. Relative to how they were back in 2016 when Syrians had only recently moved in, we noticed that many of the Syrian apartment buildings have been now have new doors, windows that are cleaner, and some had new glass installed. Jungles of jasmine now grow on railings, gates, patios, and doorways of refugee residences.

Social and Cultural Integration

On a superficial level, social and cultural integration for Syrians has been easy. In Jordan and Syria, the food is more or less the same, the religion is the same, the language is the same, and customs and mannerisms are similar. Many Syrian Irbid residents we spoke to have chosen not to emigrate to Europe—even in cases where they have the means to do so—because they prefer a familiar way of life in Jordan. ““Who’s crazy enough to go to the West? Why would I go to a Western country where I don’t know anyone [and] I don’t know how they live there?” said one Syrian man.

⁴⁴ Alafi & Alfawaeer, 2014.

⁴⁵ This is true on a superficial level. On a deeper level, there are subtle differences between Syrians and Jordanians that become noticeable when attempting to build close social or professional relations.

⁴⁶ Hirsch, 1992; Mondry, 2013

Almost all of the Syrians we spoke with in Irbid report that their neighbors are friendly and do not present problems. Their relations are generally fine on this basic level, and yet, there are at least six significant obstacles to creating deep and broad social and cultural integration:

1. According to a national survey, most Jordanians today oppose Syrian-Jordanian intermarriage,⁴⁷ and we only know of three Syrian-Jordanian marriages since the conflict began.⁴⁸
2. The built environment of Irbid—especially the location and limited usage of its parks and other public spaces—limits the types of spontaneous social interactions that occur between national groups.
3. While on a superficial level Syrians and Jordanians have many shared cultural and linguistic similarities and are usually indistinguishable to outsiders, there are subtle distinguishing features between them that both groups are hypersensitive to. These features can allow for prejudice and avoidance.⁴⁹ Unable to hide their nationality, young Syrians we spoke to reported that it is difficult to casually make friends with Jordanians. After three years living in southwestern Irbid, one young Syrian man said his only close friend is a connection from before the war who is still stuck in Syria serving in the army. He tells his friend in Syria not to come to Jordan “because it isn’t their country,” and he “won’t feel welcome here.”
4. Of the Syrians we spoke with, it was widely felt that Jordan, and Irbid Governorate especially, has a relatively conservative, reserved culture that makes it uncomfortable to approach strangers. “I’ve never even met my neighbor,” was a common complaint among Syrians, although with some follow-up questioning, most conceded they had met and regularly exchange pleasantries with Jordanian neighbors but have never been invited over for tea or a meal. “It would be uncomfortable” was a common reason given, compared to life in the relatively bustling Dara’a or Damascus where Syrians remember an ease of interaction between strangers.
5. The ebb of sympathy toward Syrians by Jordanians is making integration increasingly difficult. At the start of the conflict, the tone in Irbid toward Syrians was *ahlan wa sahlan*, hello and welcome!⁵⁰ However, as the conflict dragged on, it became clear Syrians could not go home anytime soon, and the humanitarian community flooded in to give relief to Syrians (but not to poor Jordanians). With this, the Jordanians’ sympathy toward Syrians declined.⁵¹ “When someone comes to your house, you welcome them, but when they stay one week, two weeks, a year, it becomes hard,” said one Jordanian man, speaking metaphorically of the situation. In a

⁴⁷ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁴⁸ Attitudes toward mixed-nationality marriages are complicated. On the one hand, there is a long history of Syrian-Jordanian intermarriage, building tribal and family ties across the Jordanian-Syrian border. On the other hand, recent history has introduced nationalistic feelings of superiority/inferiority that complicate acceptance of intermarriage. These attitudes also have a gendered dimension: generally speaking, a Jordanian family will be less resistant to a Jordanian man marrying a Syrian woman, but more resistant to a Jordanian woman marrying a Syrian man because of patrilineal beliefs.

⁴⁹ As an example, in our experiences, for male Syrians, Al Hamraa cigarettes are popular, while Jordanian men prefer other brands like Gauloises. The way beards are trimmed, haircuts, and the ways hair gel is used are also distinguishers. Among women, both Syrians and Jordanians often wear hijab, but the way it is tied may be an immediate giveaway of a woman’s nationality.

⁵⁰ Jordanians we spoke to attribute this warm conviviality to long-held Bedouin culture, where traditionally a guest may stay in a Bedouin’s tent and be given food, water, tea, and shelter for three full days and nights before they are even expected to reveal their name or why they are there.

⁵¹ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

2016 national poll, most Jordanians reported an increase in “psychological pressure,” because of the presence of Syrian refugees.⁵² “When I first got here it was fine...[now] it is as if there is an invasion, and we’re...the invaders,” said a young Syrian male in Irbid in 2016.

6. The greatest obstacle to social integration in Irbid has nothing to do with refugees and everything to do with the social characteristics of modern cities compared to small towns and villages.⁵³ There is not “community” in Irbid like there is in the surrounding small towns. Both refugees and Jordanians describe feeling more welcome and comfortable in small villages like Jerash, compared to urban hubs like Irbid or Amman. When I (Agyead) moved from Irbid to the countryside, I immediately felt at home. There is a great degree of similarity between the feel of the villages in Jordan and the rural area where I’m from in southern Syria.⁵⁴ This was especially apparent in how houses are distributed, the customs and traditions of Jordanian rural society, and the organization of village life.

Urbanizing Jordanians and Syrians who come to Irbid city from the *reef* (countryside) are experiencing the erosion of community and the increase in social isolation that comes with living in a modern city.⁵⁵ The humanitarian goals of “social cohesion” and “community building” between refugees and host populations therefore seems to have limited viability in Irbid, not so much because of strong antagonisms between these groups, but because of the lack of “community” endemic in modern cities the world over.

Neighbors: An Opportunity for Social and Cultural Integration

Of the Syrians we spoke with, the main opportunity for expanding social connections in Irbid is meeting their neighbors. For example, my (Agyead’s) neighbors took care of me and were very concerned for me when I got sick. The Syrians we spoke with who knew their Jordanian neighbors reported creating a small number of deep and strong social connections, but because any one person can only have a couple of neighbors, they were not able to create a large number of wide social connections across the city.

Anchor Institutions: An Opportunity for Social and Cultural Integration

Among Syrians we spoke to who reported having Jordanian friends, a second opportunity for building social connections came from belonging to an anchor institution outside of work that included both Syrians and Jordanians,⁵⁶ such as a mosque, a university, or a sports league. For example, in Irbid, most of my (Agyead’s) relations were with Syrians until I began studying at a university where I formed a group of close relationships with some of my Jordanian colleagues. Indeed, all of my colleagues and

⁵² Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁵³ Documented in the landmark work by Putnam, 2001. Residents of modern cities have higher rates of social isolation and accompanying mental health issues than those living in rural areas. See Gruebner *et al.*, 2017.

⁵⁴ Syrians and Jordanians alike who move to Irbid city from rural villages described issues adjusting to their new urban lifestyle. This contrasted with Syrians from major cities, like Dara’a proper, who had a relatively easy time adjusting and if anything, said Irbid felt quiet and provincial.

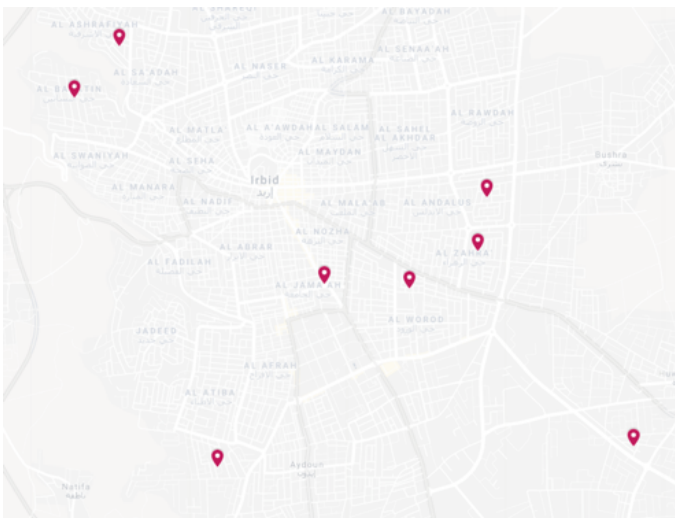
⁵⁵ See Putnam, 2001 and Gruebner *et al.*, 2017.

⁵⁶ Workplaces are often divided by nationality, and from our experiences, widespread workplace discrimination between Jordanians and Syrians often prevents multinational workplaces from becoming institutions supportive of social integration.

professors at the university had a positive attitude to me and my background, and most of these relationships remained strong after I graduated.

Public Spaces: Where to Integrate?

The built environment of Irbid restricts the kinds of social interactions that can occur between refugee and host populations. Irbid's few public parks are small, unkempt, and mostly unused.⁵⁷ Children play in the streets or on improvised soccer fields in abandoned dirt lots where families have picnics. At night, the wide sidewalks along *sharia aj-jama'a* (university street) become sitting areas for men and women, young and old who put out shisha waterpipes and plastic chairs to socialize but mostly stick with their own family members and co-nationals.



While there are eight public parks in Irbid, they are not well maintained and are rarely used. Despite dramatic population growth, no parks have been added to the city proper since at least 1992. The exception is the big new King Abdullah II Gardens, added in 2001, sit at the outskirts of the city (bottom right corner), inaccessible and unknown to almost all Syrian residents. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

Abandoned Lots and Public Parks



Without public spaces, abandoned lots have become the places for picnics and football.

This lack of public spaces means people have to socialize in private spaces—courtyards or the living room *salons*.⁵⁸ This reduces the chance encounters that might build connections with people outside of family or co-national groups. Being outside in public parks also helps to humanize others, who are observed hanging around with their children or friends. Without public spaces, this humanization does not occur. Instead of building empathy in public parks, Jordanians see Syrian children playing in the streets and judge Syrians' parenting skills: "They let their kids run in the streets, with all this traffic, how could they do this, are they crazy?!" said one Jordanian male.

⁵⁷ The one exception being the big new King Abdullah II Gardens, added in 2001, but it sits at the outskirts of the city (see map), inaccessible and unknown to almost all Syrian residents.

⁵⁸ As it is called in Arabic countries. A female colleague who lived in Irbid noted that malls provide a good space for socializing between female Jordanians and Syrians, but also believed this may be a gender-specific opportunity. Neither Charles nor Ageyad have spent time socializing in Irbid's malls.

Experiences of Other Migrant Groups in Irbid

While Syrian refugees in Jordan have grabbed international news headlines, the transformation of Irbid also includes the experiences and impact of numerous other mixed migrants who arrive fleeing conflict and/or seeking economic and educational opportunities.

There are small numbers of Iraqi and Sudanese refugees in Irbid. There are also many Nigerians in Irbid, studying Arabic in the universities or playing soccer professionally in the Irbid football clubs. They express dissatisfaction with the quality of life here, which clashes with Nigerian culture: “There’s nothing to do here but sleep” was a common statement. South and Southeast Asian men and women live in Irbid too, studying Arabic and Sharia law, or working in restaurants or as housekeepers. Their apartments are mixed in with Syrians and Jordanians but are subtly distinguishable by the small traditional strings of colored flags hanging on their balconies.

The largest migrant group in Irbid, other than Syrians and Palestinians, is Egyptian migrant workers, who find jobs working in shisha cafes, construction, or seasonally doing agricultural work in the surrounding farmland. Most work irregularly yet face no real risk of deportation because of diplomatic protections from Cairo. These Egyptian migrant workers send remittances back to families, profiting from the exorbitantly high exchange rate between the Jordanian dinar (JD) and the Egyptian pound (EGP).

Meanwhile, the Palestinian refugees of Irbid have been largely forgotten by the international community. The UNHCR office for Syrian refugees is a swanky new compound in the wealthiest neighborhood of the city, while the UNRWA⁵⁹ offices are weathered buildings with dirty and disintegrating flags in poor neighborhoods downtown. Like Syrians today, many Palestinians also initially thought they would return home in a few years and started off their stay in Jordan living in camps. Today many non-camp Palestinians are integrated into Irbid’s economy. Many of the falafel sellers, bakers, and other street vendors across the city are Palestinian. However, while these livelihoods are widely available, only some Jordanian Palestinians have been able to escape low-paid labor, and there is a stratification of labor based on Palestinian origin. “[Street vending] is a possibility for Palestinians, and they make good money,” said one long-time Irbid Jordanian resident, “but this isn’t good for Jordanian men, for their future, their family.”⁶⁰

⁵⁹ United Nations Relief and Works Agency. This is the UN agency responsible for Palestinian affairs.

⁶⁰ It is beyond the scope of this report to describe Palestinian-Jordanian integration, but this chapter of history may offer some forecasting for the future of Syrians. For more, readers are referred to [Tiltne & Zhang, 2013](#).

Water and Waste

The limit on water resources in Jordan is one of the most significant megatrends that will limit Irbid's growth and its capacity to host new arrivals. In Irbid, lack of municipal potable water infrastructures means that trucks are responsible for distributing drinking water, but this has gone from a daily activity to a once-weekly one. Jordanians we spoke with saw a correlation between this decline in distribution and the arrival of Syrians, and blame Syrians for water shortages. However, Jordan's dwindling water resources were projected to be a national crisis for decades before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict.⁶¹ Jordan is the third-most water-insecure country in the world with "extremely high stress" on its water resources,⁶² and its water management plan is not sufficient to meet the needs of the country's native population growth, much less population growth due to immigration into the country.

The main cause of water resources' rapid drainage is that the region's underground aquifers are being depleted by Gulf Arab agriculture, and water from the Jordan River is being diverted upstream to supply rising Israeli agricultural and public consumption.⁶³ As water resources have declined and demand has increased with population growth, private water sellers in Irbid have tried to fill the gap using desalinization, and Irbid's farmers have turned to illegal pumps to increase supply,⁶⁴ but this is not a sustainable solution for Jordan's growing cities. While it is beyond the scope of this report to discuss Jordan's water policy in detail, it is critical to note that the country and the city of Irbid have a very real naturally imposed limit to how many people can be hosted, not because of employment challenges or social tensions, but because of water resource scarcity.⁶⁵

Water Shortages in Irbid



A water truck refills an apartment's rooftop reservoir in a Syrian-dense neighborhood. Because the reduction in water truck deliveries from daily to weekly corresponded with the arrival of Syrian refugees, Irbid residents blame water shortages on increased consumption from Syrians, not on regional water shortages or overall urbanization and national population growth.

⁶¹ [Ministry of Water and Irrigation reports at least as far back as 1996](#) ring alarm bells about dwindling water resources.

⁶² [Ministry of Water and Irrigation, 2018](#).

⁶³ Ministry of Water and Irrigation, 2016.

⁶⁴ Al-Tabini *et al.*, 2011.

⁶⁵ An in-depth analysis of Jordan's water scarcity is beyond the scope of this report. Interested readers are referred to the work of [Raed Al-Tabini and the Badia Fund](#).

Most Jordanians also believe that municipalities are no longer able to handle waste management because of Syrian refugees.⁶⁶ Trash trucks do move through the city once a week to pick up garbage before bins overflow, and streets are relatively clean. However, despite widespread public information campaigns on TV about the importance of using trash cans, Irbid residents regularly throw garbage in the streets and burn trash in alleyways and empty lots. Residential neighborhoods often smell of smoldering plastic. Waste management issues seem more to do with lack of good practices for waste disposal than too much production of waste from Irbid's refugee population.

What a Mess



Waste management infrastructures exist, but norms of proper garbage disposal and recycling are still not widely adopted.

Education

According to law, schooling is available for Jordanian and Syrian children through Grade 12. However, the city's education system has several limitations for even short-term *de facto* integration. First, Irbid's schools have exceeded their capacity, and private schools are not within reach for most low-income Syrians and Jordanians alike.⁶⁷ Second, public schools have been nationally segregated, with Syrian children attending public schools in the afternoon, from 12:20–4:30 pm, while Jordanian students start at 8:00 am and are done by the afternoon. Only 13% of Syrian students are enrolled in the morning shift with Jordanian students.⁶⁸ This segregation in schools will likely have serious long-term negative consequences for integration whether Syrians remain in Irbid for months, years, decades, or generations into the future.⁶⁹

Third, in the midst of wide-scale un- and underemployment, there is limited faith among both Syrians and Jordanians that educational achievement will lead to a good job. "There's no point" was a common refrain. Enrollment rates of young Syrians ages 6–13 has gone up significantly since 2012 to above 86%. However, among older school-aged Syrians ages 15 and above, that number is less than 39%,⁷⁰ likely because they are losing interest in school and finding low-skilled jobs. Other reasons for limited attendance include bullying, discrimination, and child labor. Further, it is illegal for Syrians to work as teachers, so students feel underrepresented and out of place in schools.

⁶⁶ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁶⁷ Only a few children attend private schools as these are too expensive for Syrians and low- to middle-income Jordanians alike. See Al-Tamini, 2017.

⁶⁸ According to educational workers interviewed by the authors.

⁶⁹ Virtually all other RIT studies find schools to be fundamental places for facilitating social and economic integration.

Regardless of how long Syrians remain in Irbid, any delay in education has serious long-term consequences for youths' social and economic wellbeing. For more, readers are referred to the [No Lost Generation resources database](#).

⁷⁰ Al Gahd, 2019.

The quality of education for Syrians and Jordanians alike is low in both private and public institutions. “I don’t like it here,” said one Jordanian student at a private Jordanian high school that has no Syrian students, “[it has] very bad instruction, very bad management, we can’t learn anything. I learn English by myself playing video games.”

What Young Men in Irbid Do When They Are Not in School

“One of the biggest threats to social cohesion for youth is too much unproductive extra time,” said a Jordanian woman, herself a mother of two well-educated children. In Irbid, youth spend most of their time in a few places. If they are in school, they will go to class during the day, then study at home or in one of Irbid’s popular “study cafes” modeled after Starbucks.

Those who are not in school may spend a few hours working menial jobs and the rest of their time in video arcades. The soccer video game “FIFA” is popular with teens and young men. Why play soccer outside on a field when you can sit in an air-conditioned room and smoke while you play? Youth can melt away years in these darkened rooms.

“My friends in the army, some in business, some in the university, we’re all over the place, but we get together and play [video games],” said one young Jordanian. Sitting four to a console, class hierarchy disappears, and young people bond over video games. From our conversations and observations, video gaming is not an activity where Syrians and Jordanians mix. “Everyone plays together,” said one young Jordanian man. “Syrians too?” I asked. “No, none of my friends are Syrian,” he answered.

Syrian and Jordanian College Aspirations

When asked whether they wanted to go to college, both Syrian and Jordanian youth usually asked whether we meant a Jordanian college or a college in the United States or Europe. They saw little value in the former but saw the latter as a golden ticket to a better life (but also an unattainable achievement because of the prohibitive cost, language barrier, and the need for a student visa). While Jordan has an impressive college participation rate among women, workforce participation remains extremely low at only 14%.⁷¹

Only 56 registered Syrians (21 male and 35 female) are studying at the major universities in Irbid Governorate,⁷² although conversations with a representative of the Syrian Students’ Union in Jordan suggest there may be as many as 7,000 unregistered Syrians studying at smaller, lower-cost schools like Jerash University, with around 500 receiving some kind of financial support like scholarships from UNHCR’s Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) and the European Union (EU)-funded EDU-SYRIA. Over the past two years, several registered Syrian students have received scholarships at universities such as Zarqa Private University and Jerusalem College.

⁷¹ [World Bank Group, “Labor force participation rate, female,” 2019.](#)

⁷² UNHCR, 2016.

Education is widely cited as a critical component of refugee integration,⁷³ but in Irbid educational achievement does not support integration. In fact, it is just the opposite: for the minority of Jordanians and Syrians who attain high school and university degrees, these degrees open up the door for them to leave the city to begin better-paying skilled jobs elsewhere, either in Amman or abroad, since Irbid has a scarcity of highly skilled, high-paying jobs for well-educated individuals.

Language Learning

Both Syrians and Jordanians we spoke with universally wanted to learn foreign languages,

College Culture



Zeus coffee, run by two Palestinian brothers, is one of the many Starbucks knock-offs, complete with the green circular logo, dark wood furniture, and young people studying over expensive coffee drinks for hours. Most of these student patrons are not originally from Irbid and instead come from wealthy families around Jordan, staying in the city during the week to attend classes, forming enclaves but not truly integrating into the city.

“The Biggest Threat to Youth”



The ominously named “No Way Out PlayStation Center,” housed in a windowless basement, hires young men to stand on the street pressuring passersby to enter.

especially Western ones. Well-paid jobs in Jordan usually require proficiency in English. However, language instruction at the universities is not effective. “Our classes are officially all in English,” said a Yarmouk University professor, “but as soon as class starts, they switch to Arabic! Many of the professors barely read English themselves!”

Although expensive, private tutors are the most effective way to learn a foreign language. These tutors are so ubiquitous that a client can even choose between American and UK versions of English. French and German are less common but also available.

All those we met who spoke English fluently—from businesspeople to taxi drivers to shisha assistants—said they learned English by watching movies, listening to music, having an English-speaking romantic partner, or from playing video games.

⁷³ For example, Dryden-Peterson, 2015.

The Impact of Yarmouk University

The founding of Irbid's first major university, Yarmouk University, in 1976 had a dramatic impact on the city. College attendance rates across Jordan increased significantly in the 1970s, spiking in the 1990s and early 2000s with higher education policy reforms aimed at transitioning Jordan into a knowledge-based economy. As a result, Irbid's population spiked as young people arrived to attend classes and their families often followed. These family movements into the city created a large demand for housing, goods, services, and information technology: the city's economy blossomed to feed this new consumption with new shops, food distributors, financial institutions, tech companies, and residential buildings popping up around the area known as "University Circle."

The university affected gender roles too, as women began to spend time away from parental and male oversight. Women gained the foundation to move toward self-supporting careers, and traditional beliefs that women should

Private Language Tutoring



Advertisements for private English and German language tutors are found on streets across Irbid, catering to both Jordanians and Syrians.

Disrupted Education

Integration to the school system is often difficult for Syrian students because of disruptions in their education in Syria during the conflict. One young man's schooling was disrupted in 2012 when militants in his Damascus suburb began kidnapping children and ransoming them to finance their operations. He dropped out until he was able to take a bus to a more secure school in downtown Damascus. This worked until militants began shooting at the bus, at which point he stopped going to school. Eventually he was smuggled to Jordan and settled in Irbid. On paper, he could have resumed schooling here, and he expressed the desire to return to class. However, after so many disruptions, dealing with long-term pain due to an injury from being shot in Syria, and with more pressing matters like taking care of the apartment for his family, he seemed unlikely to enroll.

stay home became undermined. By 1998, women were in the majority at Yarmouk University.⁷⁴ However, today Irbid's low- and middle-income Jordanians, Syrians, and other migrants speak of

⁷⁴ Kaya, 2010. While attitudes toward gendered division of labor shifted, this did not cause dramatic changes in practice. The female workforce participation rate in Jordan is just 14%, far below the global average of 47% ([World Bank Group, "Labor force participation rate, female," 2019](#)).

Yarmouk University as if it was a faraway place. Its tall gates represent the high cost that makes it infeasible for all of these groups, with much of its student body coming from wealthy families in Amman, Aqaba, or elsewhere. Today, its impact is as an economic anchor—wealthy students financially supporting the numerous cafes, restaurants, landlords, and shops in the area. It has limited effect on the education of Irbid residents or the city’s culture.

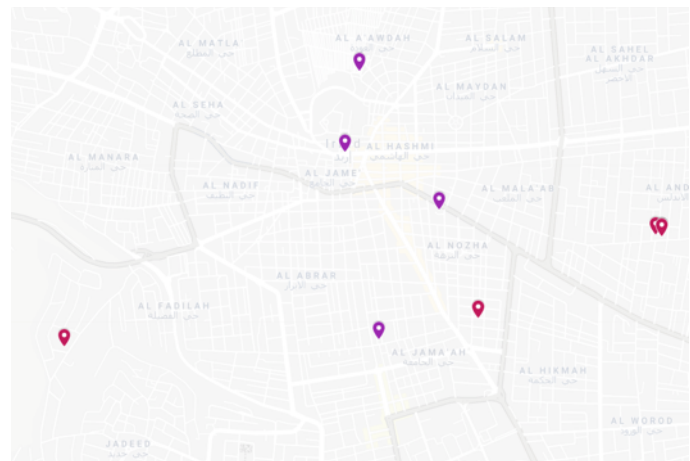
Security and Public Safety

A national poll suggests the majority of Jordanians believe Syrians have brought safety and security risks with them to Jordan.⁷⁵ Reciprocally, most of the Syrians we’ve spoken to felt that Jordanian security services harbored some form of prejudice against them.⁷⁶ However, to our knowledge there is no evidence that crime rates or insecurity have increased in Irbid since the large-scale arrival of Syrians in 2012, and any perceived increases in risk by Irbid’s residents seem to be more closely related to the declining sense of community that has come with increased urbanization, like not knowing everyone on your block and the streets being louder and more chaotic at night.

Jordanian Perspectives

Most Jordanians believe that the arrival of Syrian refugees has put them at greater risk of armed violence, increased crime rates, and made Jordan a more divided and politically unstable country.⁷⁷ Three-fourths of Jordanians are in favor of a security database with the identities and biometrics of all Syrians living in the country.⁷⁸ These beliefs were significantly more pervasive in Irbid than in other towns like Mafraq or Ramtha.⁷⁹

Irbid does not have the locked-down or paranoid feeling of other heavily secured cities in the Middle East, but there are constant reminders that you are on the edge of a conflict zone. In October 2015, high winds carried two shells from a Syrian artillery barrage that



The four historical police stations of Irbid were originally in the city center and the Palestinian “camp” of Al A’awdah (purple), but since 1992 there has been a growth of “public safety” offices in the city (red).

⁷⁵ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁷⁶ This prejudice was usually described as subtle but noticeable. In major incidents like murder, Syrians we spoke with said they had no doubt there would be fairness, but in minor day-to-day disputes like traffic accidents, Syrians felt that police tended to take the side of Jordanians.

⁷⁷ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁷⁸ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁷⁹ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

The Kingdom and its Army



A news channel called “The Kingdom” ran an ad showing a Jordanian soldier carrying a Syrian child in his arms. This type of military nationalist imagery is widespread in marketing and reflects the popular appeal of the security apparatus that is given credit for providing calm in a chaotic region.

building, he said, “I don’t know you [Syrians], you don’t know me [Jordanians], but we’re in the same apartment building, sharing everything.” His viewpoint harkens back to rural attitudes about safety across Jordan’s Northern Badia: for most of the 20th century, responsibility for security was less in the hands of formal institutions like police and came more from community and interpersonal trust. “In the villages, I know everyone, all the kids play together, if something happens, we know who it was,” he said, implying that in an increasingly urban world, this closeness is gone, and therefore from his perspective, security is gone too.

The Hashemites have cultivated a deep trust in the police, and all of the major tribes are represented in the security apparatus. For Jordanian citizens belonging to these tribes, police and soldiers are seen as guardians. As an illustration, I (Charles) was in the car with a Jordanian friend who was pulled over repeatedly for speeding. Each time, he would coolly stop, keep the music blasting, and joke with the officer. Offering his tribal name, they would mention a mutual acquaintance and sometimes laugh about being distant cousins. Then my friend would drive off saying, “The police are the friends of the

landed in Ramtha, only 20 km (12 mi) from Irbid center. Army and police officers stroll casually through marketplaces in full fatigues. When tussles break out at night between male shop keepers, the fight is quickly broken up by the blaring horns of armored security vans and black-uniformed police officers.

“Day to day there isn’t any problem, but every once in a while, something happens, so you feel it,” said one Jordanian resident. When asked for specific examples of insecurity due to Syrians, Jordanians we spoke to could only cite rumors of minor incidents like theft or fistfights.

Among Jordanians in Irbid, there is a widespread gratitude toward the Jordanian security apparatus that has expanded in the city since 2012 in response to the arrival of Syrians. The Jordanian police began deploying many more plainclothes officers in Syrian-dense neighborhoods, and there are many new public safety offices across the city. These are not aimed explicitly at political violence but rather are tasked with handling anything from theft to disorderly conduct to harassment.

One long-time Jordanian Irbid resident said, “There is mistrust between Syrians and Jordanians.” Pointing at a Syrian apartment

Jordanian people.⁸⁰ Not like in America.” Jordan’s Palestinians, Syrians, and other migrants we’ve spoken to did not share this unbridled level of comfort with police.

The Biggest Threat to Public Safety? Not ISIS, traffic.

Irbid police officers’ time is spent mostly managing gridlocked traffic, especially at rush hour, when battalions of police wave on passenger cars, order trucks loaded with vegetables to keep moving, and help pedestrians cross the congested roadways. Parents regularly talk about their fear that their children will be hit by traffic (Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016). Syrian parents tell kids to stay out of the streets, but without public parks, the roads are soccer fields. For Western migrants their biggest risk comes not from terrorism, but from being in a car accident. Jordanians believe the increase in traffic and pedestrian collisions is a product of Syrians’ arrival in Irbid; however, frequent pedestrian collisions were common long before 2012 (Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016).

Syrian Perspectives

Syrians we spoke with described hearing about theft in Irbid, especially of money, partly because of the black market for ID cards, especially passports. Syrians reported going to police for help in some matters, but not usually for disputes with Jordanians because they believed that the officers would side with Jordanians. In the early years of arrival (2013–2015), Syrians feared being asked for papers or being sent to Za’atari camp, particularly Syrian students who were assumed by police to be unregistered refugees, although this concern has declined in the past 2–3 years.

It seemed that Syrians we spoke with who had experiences with attacks by the Assad government had developed a deeper skepticism or even fear of central authority than those who had not. Of those we spoke to, this concern was often confirmed in Syrians’ first encounter with the Jordanian military while

Sexual Harassment

The problem of sexual harassment, mostly of women, is widespread for Syrians and Jordanians while working or commuting, especially in the downtown market and in humanitarian organizations. However, from the authors’ observations in the workplace and communications with numerous colleagues, the harassment rate of Syrian women is greater because—based on conversations and workplace observations—they are considered weak by some Jordanian men, and they lack access to legal and social protection. One local study suggests half of Jordanian women and three-quarters of Syrian refugee women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Husseini, 2018).

crossing the border. About half of the Syrians I (Charles) spoke with said they had experienced excessive force, harassment, or had IDs taken away and not returned when crossing the border.

⁸⁰ This comfort with the security forces is highly tribal; not all Jordanians share this sentiment toward the security services, depending on their tribal affiliation.

This contrasted with Jordanians' perceptions of border security: "I want you to go there [to the border]," said one Jordanian woman connected with the border security force, "You will see all the hardship they go through." In fact, we have both heard frequent firsthand stories of Jordanian soldiers carrying dead or injured Syrian children across the border, only to be yelled at or spit on by grieving and emotionally shocked Syrian refugees. Border security and police are often young Jordanian boys doing their best to

A Syrian's Experience with Security

I (Agyead) was stopped by a patrol on University Street in Irbid and taken to the security center for 12 hours. This was because I had not yet been issued the security identification card carried by Syrian refugees, was using my passport as an identification document, and was not registered as a refugee. However, even after this, I have never felt for a moment that I was a stranger in Irbid and Jerash, and see this incident as an exception, not a normal event.

A Jordanian's Experience with Security

While getting a pair of sunglasses repaired at a Syrian shop near University Street, a Jordanian friend and I (Charles) noticed two Syrian toddlers attempting to cross a busy highway. My friend pulled them up to the sidewalk as cars whizzed past and asked them where their family was. They didn't know. One of the girl's faces was wet with tears. Suddenly we were approached by a man in a button-down shirt and jeans who asked what was going on. My friend explained the situation, and the man replied that he was a police officer. After exchanging tribal names to verify identity, we went with the plainclothes officer to take the two little girls back to their home, since they had calmed them down enough to guide us, turn by turn, to their apartment.

The police officer rapped loudly on the apartment door. The girls' father appeared, and the officer began disparaging him about his irresponsibility. The father was embarrassed, but his face also conveyed disdain at the officer's shouting. He tried to explain that the girls' grandfather had just died, and their mother was overwhelmed trying to keep track of all of the children in the building while other parents were away at work. After more scolding, an old man who had appeared in the hallway began gently patting the arm of the officer, "Aasef, we're sorry, we're sorry."

Having made his point, the officer left, with us in tow. My friend and the officer slapped hands in the alleyway, proud of their good deed, and we went our separate ways. Back at the eyeglass repair shop, my friend said to the employee, "I'm sorry, my sister," explaining our sudden departure and the incident with the two girls. At the mention of "police," the Syrian employee's posture straightened. Finishing the story, my friend transitioned, "What do I owe you [for the sunglass repair]?" "Nothing, nothing," she said in a flat tone, "How could I ask for payment after such kindness?" My friend was very proud. From his viewpoint, this was just another incident of Jordanian hospitality, and Syrian appreciation for the security Jordanians had endowed them.

help but stressed by the job of keeping a war zone at bay. They try hard, offering water, words of support, and gestures of welcome, but making Syrian arrivals feel warmly welcomed is a challenging expectation. Still, the different experiences of Jordanians and Syrians with border security are stark. Jordanians describe the procedure of meeting new arrivals at the border as "entry interviews," but Syrian refugees use the word "interrogation."

And yet, Syrians also widely expressed genuine gratitude and praise for the Jordanian military and police for giving them a secure place to live. They often recounted stories of violence in Syria, and then would say they were grateful to be safe while their friends and family endure airstrikes and sniper fire across the border back in Syria.

The Healthcare System

Most Jordanians blame Syrian refugees for Irbid's scarcities of medicines and long wait times for medical treatment.⁸¹ However, only 8% of visitors to healthcare facilities in Irbid are Syrians,⁸² suggesting that these deficits have more to do with population growth and urbanization than the arrival of refugees. There has been an increase in healthcare facilities in Irbid (see map below), but not enough to keep pace with the city's population growth.

The first medical care most Syrian refugees receive is not in Irbid at all, but at Za'atari camp or the medical facilities at the Rukban and Hadalat border crossings. By the time refugees reach Jordan's cities, critical care and urgent health issues have usually been resolved, so Syrians' demand on Irbid's healthcare system is mainly for treating chronic problems like malnutrition or diabetes, and occasionally physical therapy for injuries.⁸³ As a result, international pharmaceutical industries have boomed in Irbid. This industry provides well-paying jobs to both Syrians and Jordanians; however, insiders describe a massive pharmaceutical black market for drugs while companies rake in profits from contracts with international humanitarian organizations that are often unfulfilled.

Ninety-six percent of refugees in Jordan report seeking healthcare when they need it regardless of their registration status.⁸⁴ A 2014 study suggests that many healthcare providers in Irbid do not ask to see registration documents before providing services.⁸⁵ However, while healthcare services may technically be available, some Syrians do not know where and how to access healthcare services,⁸⁶ while long wait times and unavailability of appointments are the most commonly reported barrier to accessing healthcare among urban Syrian refugees.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁸² Ay *et al.*, 2016.

⁸³ Only a minority, 16%, of Syrians in Jordan have chronic health issues such as hearing, vision, or mobility limitations. See Al Gahd, 2019.

⁸⁴ Ay *et al.*, 2016.

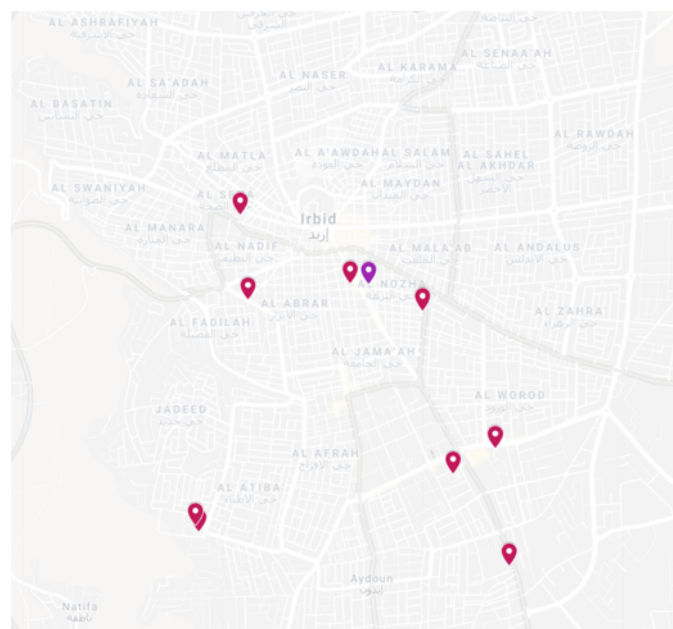
⁸⁵ Ay *et al.*, 2016.

⁸⁶ Abisaab *et al.*, 2014.

⁸⁷ Ay *et al.*, 2016.

Psychosocial care is accessible to less than half of urban Syrian refugees who need it.⁸⁸ “Even before the uprising began,” write Ay *et al.* (2016), “major depressive disorder was the second cause of the disability-adjusted life year” for Syrians.⁸⁹ There are gender-specific issues with healthcare too: women report a scarcity of female healthcare providers to provide gynecology and other culturally sensitive care,⁹⁰ and report dealing with the physical and emotional burdens of rape and other sexual and gender-based violence that are not widely treated.

Meanwhile, limited access to preventive healthcare is of concern. Fewer than one in four non-camp refugee children in Jordan are immunized.⁹¹ Smoking, poor diet, and lack of exercise are additional health threats for Jordanians and Syrians alike but receive little attention from the international humanitarian or development communities. About a quarter of school-aged boys and 10% of girls smoke.⁹² Shisha cafes show live soccer matches, blare pop music, and provide an affordable place where youth can hang out in co-ed groups freely, drawing in young men and women who spend hours sitting in groups around tables alternating between water pipes and cigarettes. And while smoking is pervasive, exercise is not. Today, playing the FIFA video game is far more popular than kicking a ball around. Both Jordanian and Syrian diets are heavy with breads, meat, and sugary drinks—heavily sweetened tea and soda—which are showcased prominently on the table at every meal. Diabetes rates across the Middle East are racing up,⁹³ and obesity problems are sure to follow.



Before 1992, Irbid had only two hospitals (purple). Since then, the number of hospitals and clinics has expanded (red), including in the low- and middle-income neighborhoods now housing many Syrian refugees, including the Al Atiba, Al Abrar, Al Nozha, and Al Worod neighborhoods. The issue with medical services in Irbid today is not proximity but high costs, long waits, and inability to perform advanced procedures. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

⁸⁸ Ay *et al.*, 2016; Krause *et al.*, 2015

⁸⁹ The disability-adjusted life year (DALY) is a measure of the number of lost healthy years an affliction is predicted to cause in an individual’s life or in a population. See WHO, https://www.who.int/healthinfo/global_burden_disease/metrics_daly/en/.

⁹⁰ Abisaab *et al.*, 2014.

⁹¹ Robertson *et al.*, 2017.

⁹² McKelvey *et al.*, 2013.

⁹³ Abuyassin & Laher, 2016.

The Transportation System

Jordanians widely blame Syrian refugees for increased traffic congestion,⁹⁴ but this issue seems more to do with an increase in population density, a lack of central planning for the road network, and a rapid increase in Jordanian car ownership rates since the 1990s.⁹⁵ The city's roads are too narrow and cannot be widened because of the layout of buildings. The lack of parking lots means people park in the streets, further constricting traffic flow. Some entrepreneurs use abandoned lots and act as informal valets, but this hardly presents a sustainable solution.

There is no rail system in Irbid, and the closest thing to public transit is the minibuses that crisscross the city. Refugees we spoke with say the lack of affordable transportation to workplaces and medical facilities are a major barrier to holding down a job or accessing medical care.⁹⁶ Taxis are available but are taken only by affluent members of society. Some Syrians own cars that they drove across the border from Syria, but most cannot afford to maintain them. When the cars break down, they are abandoned. Among lower-income Syrians, carpooling in someone's van is the most efficient way of getting around.

UNHCR's Impact

UNHCR's Irbid office is in the new, exclusive, and wealthy neighborhood of Jadeed on the outskirts of the city. In 2016 (the latest available data), UNHCR provided financial assistance to 32,800 refugees in Irbid, less than 30% of the Syrian population living there.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, 85% of Syrian refugees receive World Food Programme (WFP) food vouchers for between JD 10–20 per month (USD 14–28), rarely enough to make ends meet.⁹⁸ Some Syrians have complained that since they first arrived in Irbid, their cash assistance from UNHCR has declined or been cut off.⁹⁹

Almost all Syrian refugees in Irbid we talked to spoke dismissively of UNHCR, saying they have only interacted with them once or twice over the five-plus years they have lived in Jordan and have received little help from them. “I went there but they didn't do anything,” or “They're no help at all,” or even “*Ya haram*”¹⁰⁰ were common refrains among Syrians we spoke to in Irbid. However, there was widespread confusion about which organizations provide which services, with several Syrians telling us they were registered with “DRC” (Danish Refugee Council), for example. When asked to clarify if they meant UNHCR, they brushed off the question dismissively as if it did not matter. Therefore, the lack of satisfaction might be due to lack of understanding about service providers rather than poor service

⁹⁴ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

⁹⁵ Al-Sahili & Aboul-Ella, 1992; [Jordan Strategy Forum 2016](#).

⁹⁶ Ay *et al.*, 2016, Krause *et al.*, 2015.

⁹⁷ UNHCR, 2016.

⁹⁸ UNHCR, 2016.

⁹⁹ Because UNHCR is operating below its budget requirements, it relies on a Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF) model based on survey data to allocate its limited resources to the individuals that the model rates as most vulnerable. As individuals or families become “less vulnerable” according to the model—usually because they increase their expenditures, which is used as a proxy for measuring their income—then they may receive less cash assistance. The author consulted for UNHCR on designing this model. For more on refugees' experiences with cash assistance, see “Work or Welfare” box below.

¹⁰⁰ A religiously-tinged expression of strong disapproval.

quality. For refugees, the main motivation for going through the effort of registering with UNHCR is the slim but life-changing possibility of winning the resettlement lottery.¹⁰¹

One impact of UNHCR's cash assistance programs is modernization of Irbid's banks, which have retrofitted their ATMS with protruding retinal scanners required for refugees to verify their identities before they can use their ATM cards to withdraw their cash stipends. Syrians said these machines make them feel they are "being watched" and add to their anxieties about being dependent. Ominously, refugees would colloquially refer to the retina scanners as "the eyes" of UNHCR.

Although there are not yet any studies of inflation in Irbid and the fiscal impact of cash assistance, there is anecdotal evidence indicating that housing rents have increased (discussed in Housing, above).¹⁰² Food and other commodities have become more expensive too. Other than the impact of cash assistance, however, UNHCR's presence seems to have had little effect on Irbid, compared to how the ubiquitous presence of Western humanitarian workers and consultants in Amman has impacted apartment rental costs and transformed many of the city's neighborhoods into strips of Western shops and restaurants, distinct from old Amman.

Work or Welfare: Refugee Calculations on Finding Work

Syrian refugees in Jordan must decide whether they should work or rely on cash assistance. For most refugees, working does not pay significantly better than cash aid: the migrant minimum wage is only JD 150 per month (USD 211), while the Jordanian minimum wage is JD 220 (USD 310).

UNHCR relies on a complex econometric vulnerability assessment model and data collected from household and individual surveys to determine who gets cash assistance and in what amount. There are regular complaints from Syrians that the amounts in no way correlate with their needs. Of the dozens of refugees we spoke with about cash assistance, nearly half complained of having their cash assistance reduced or terminated without explanation. Most of the Syrians we spoke with said they believed that amounts of cash assistance were set arbitrarily, and that taking a job would result in loss of aid. Thus, they have little incentive to find or report employment and are incentivized to over-report family size, injuries, and sickness in the family.

The Economy

In the first years after their arrival in 2012 and 2013, most Syrians in Irbid survived off of savings, often from possessions they sold in Syria or from money wired to them from family or friends in other countries in the Arab Gulf or the West. As these savings dried up, many Syrians, especially men, found work in construction, shops/sales, manufacturing, restaurants, and agriculture. The expanding humanitarian sector became another source of income. About 25% of registered Syrian refugees have found work in humanitarian organizations (see box below: "The Humanitarian Job Sector").¹⁰³ Today,

¹⁰¹ Noting less than 1% of displaced people globally are ever resettled. On average, resettlement takes over a decade between registration and actual resettlement. See National Immigration Forum, 2019.

¹⁰² Alafi & Alfawaeer, 2014.

¹⁰³ This estimate is based on our observations and conversations with volunteers involved with the hiring for INGOs in the city.

unemployment of Syrians is only around 25%, just higher than the Jordanian national average of 18.5% and down from over 60% in 2014.¹⁰⁴ Most work in construction, handicrafts, education, services, sales, and garbage collection.¹⁰⁵

In 2012 and 2013, Syrian wages averaged JD 200 per month (USD 281),¹⁰⁶ and most Syrians lacked a work permit, making them vulnerable to exploitation by their employers.¹⁰⁷ Syrians often did not pursue

The Humanitarian Job Sector

Rent-seeking behavior aimed at international humanitarian and development funds is pervasive among Jordanian national and municipal leadership (Betts *et al.*, 2018; Kelberer, 2017). In Irbid, one of the most highly-paid, protected, and growing job sectors is humanitarian work. Refugees are employed in this sector—regularly and irregularly—as fixers, translators, and administrators in international and local organizations, receiving transportation and meal allowances averaging JD 13 per day (USD 18), plus cash stipends and other compensation. Nevertheless, these refugee humanitarian workers often have contracts that deny many of them employment protections such as social security, rights held by Jordanians. During our interviews with Syrians in Irbid, some mentioned exploitation of Syrians workers in humanitarian organizations, exposure to sexual harassment on the job, and pressure for them to do work outside their official responsibilities. Also, Syrians who work in the refugee camps have to sign a non-liability contract before they leave the office, which exempts the organization from covering any work-related injuries.

work permits because of the high cost, JD 500 (USD 704), extensive paperwork, time needed to wait in administrative offices, and requirement of employers' consent.

Few international organizations tried to protect Syrian workers in the early years of the crisis because socioeconomic vulnerability was not a concern. "It was all about protection," said one INGO director, meaning in humanitarian lexicon that meeting basic needs like food, water, shelter, healthcare, and registration was prioritized over workplace security. However, over time, Jordanians and EU donors began focusing on economic *de facto* integration. The London Conference in February 2016 produced the "Jordan Compact" in which donors (perhaps seeking to keep refugees in countries of first asylum) pledged USD 12 billion to help Syrian refugees in Jordan. In return, Jordan pledged to integrate 200,000 Syrian refugees into the local labor market.¹⁰⁸ In April 2016, the Jordanian Ministry of Labor

¹⁰⁴ Al Gahd, 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Al Gahd, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Interview by the author with Jordanian Minister. While this is an average, Irbid's refugee population is economically diverse. Some Syrians are still underpaid because they are under the legal age, making them a vulnerable group in the labor market. On the other end of the spectrum, there is a small group of Syrians who receive high wages of up to JD 600 (USD 845) per month, mostly those working in specialized fields such as select artisans and restaurant chefs.

¹⁰⁷ While having a work permit would not necessarily increase wages for Syrians, as the Syrian minimum income is only JD 150 per month, it in theory would allow protection from workplace exploitation like working unpaid hours, excessive required overtime, or arbitrary firings.

¹⁰⁸ The agreement included USD 1.7 billion in grants over three years to support infrastructure projects, a ten-year exemption from EU rules of origin, and custom relaxations for Jordanian producers who meet a labor quota of Syrian refugees. Kelberer, 2017a; Kelberer, 2017b.

(MOL) waived the fees for Syrian work permits and health certificates requirements up until the present to incentivize Syrians' acquisition of the permits.¹⁰⁹

As a result, from 2016 to March 2019, between 42,000 and 135,500 permits were issued to Syrians,¹¹⁰ including at least 5,000 to women.¹¹¹ There were also some attempts to create factories to employ Syrians as textile workers on the outskirts of Irbid, but these garment factories struggle to find Syrians or Jordanians who have the relevant craft-specific skills and willingness to work many overtime hours. Therefore, there is high turnover, and these jobs remain in the hands of South and Southeast Asian migrant workers.¹¹²

Today, Syrians' average wage ranges from JD 220 to 350 (USD 309–493), and employers are not permitted to exceed ten working hours per day in most sectors.¹¹³ However, the 135,500-permits figure is far below UNHCR and Jordanian targets,¹¹⁴ and one in four working Syrians still does not have a

Living with Fears of Not Having a Work Permit

While there are many irregular work opportunities in Irbid, they come with risks. Parents voiced fears that their children would get caught working irregularly and be deported or forcibly moved to Azraq camp. Generally, this fear is shared differently among genders. Young men talk about this dilemma as though facing it is their male responsibility, rationalizing the risk as their share of the war burden. From their perspective, since they aren't facing bombs and bullets, they can at least face down discriminatory employment laws. One teenage male refugee who works irregularly in Irbid said, "The Ministry of Labor caught five of my friends working without a permit and sent them to jail. One was deported back to Syria. He was selling roses." His tone suggested he felt he could be next but also that he had a way out. He said he could run, hide, and "wouldn't get caught," because he was "being smart about it," meaning he wasn't breaking other laws, wasn't in the drug trade or smuggling, and was generally staying under Jordanian radar.

Meanwhile, women tend to take less-visible jobs inside homes like running informal day cares, cleaning, or working part time as seamstresses, making them less at risk of being identified and punished for working without a permit.

permit. Without a permit, Syrian workers are subject to delays in payment of wages and exclusion from social security. Employers threaten Syrian workers with deportation if they try to leave their jobs or

¹⁰⁹ [Jordanian Ministry of Labor, 2019](#). At times, employers will deduct a sum from the monthly salary of workers, saying this amount is for social security. Instead of paying the fees to the relevant government institution, these employers keep the money themselves.

¹¹⁰ The exact number of permits is heavily debated, with UNHCR, media, and Jordanian government representatives all relying on opaque figures from the Ministry of Labor. While the Jordanian MOL and UNHCR report 135,000 permits to date, the Head of the Syrian Asylum Unit, Hamdan Yacoub, has claimed the number is actually only 42,000.

¹¹¹ Interview with author, Hamdan Yacoub, Ministry of Labor, Head of the Syrian Asylum Unit. For public data, see [Jordanian Ministry of Labor, 2018](#).

¹¹² Lenner & Turner, 2018.

¹¹³ Based on conversations with Syrian workers and employers around Irbid.

¹¹⁴ Meetings with Livelihoods Working Group.

voice complaints about their work conditions.¹¹⁵ In our conversations and experiences, this enforced silence was especially common among female workers.

Jordanian Economic Concerns

In a national survey, Jordanians rated the economic impact of Syrian refugees as their most pressing concern, above environmental, social, psychological, political, and security concerns.¹¹⁶ Most Jordanians believe that Syrian refugees have caused increased unemployment, increased housing and food costs, beggars in the streets, the scarcity of basic commodities in the markets, and the decrease in government subsidies.¹¹⁷

However, long before the 2012 refugee crisis began, Jordan already suffered from a 30% unemployment rate,¹¹⁸ and Irbid had high rates of poverty and unemployment, high commodity prices, and stagnant salaries.¹¹⁹ The unemployment rate among Jordanians has actually declined since 2012 to 18.5%.¹²⁰

Several Jordanians and Syrians we spoke with said their anxieties are exacerbated by the widespread belief that Syrian workers are highly skilled, especially in areas such as construction, handicrafts, and food production, and therefore tough competition for jobs. “Syrians are great at doing sidings, building decorations,” said one Jordanian when asked about Jordanian-Syrian job competition.

“Syrians make the best sweets; even I will admit they are the best,” said another.

These anxieties result in discrimination against Syrians during hiring and in the workplace. I (Agyead) think I felt like I was an exception and accepted in large part because I was a university student and did not participate in the labor market, so I did not face the common workplace discrimination other Syrians encounter. Moreover, when I began to work, I was mostly working with Syrian media organizations and INGOs, and as such, I only really began to face hate speech and racism during the last year of my stay

Local Integration, Global Context

Before the Syrian conflict broke out in 2012, Jordan and Syria had no work permit requirements and open-border trade policies. This was the result of decades of economic cooperation that began in the 1970s, meaning northern Jordan and southern Syria were in many ways economically integrated before the 2013 sealing of the border (Ryan, 2006; Brand, 1994). Widespread unemployment was not remedied by thirty years of neo-liberalization in the region that started with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank structural reforms in Jordan following its 1980s economic crisis (Alafi & Alfawaeer, 2014; [Cochrane, 2018](#); [IMF, 2019](#)). In 1999, King Abdullah II accepted IMF investment, established a series of “Qualifying Industrial Zones,” and later set up the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA). These policies led to the massive urbanization, cost of living increases, and changes in job opportunities (Lenner & Turner, 2018) that have brought wealth to a minority of Jordanians with social status and *wasta* (personal connections). The majority of Jordanians have benefitted only marginally, and there is widespread under- and unemployment (see data from [The World Bank, 2018](#)).

¹¹⁵ Arab Union of Trade Unions, Mohamed Maayta.

¹¹⁶ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

¹¹⁷ Based Al Athamneh & Al Momani, 2016.

¹¹⁸ Alafi & Alfawaeer, 2014.

¹¹⁹ Na'amneh & Husban, 2012.

¹²⁰ Al Gahd, 2019.

in Amman when I lost my previous jobs and started looking for work in Jordanian institutions. At this point, I directly experienced workplace exploitation for the first time.

Those Jordanians we spoke to with knowledge of the issue viewed the Jordan Compact with contempt: they saw the deal as an attempt by Europeans to keep Syrians out of their backyards even though there are not work opportunities in poor countries of first asylum like Jordan. As a result, while the Hashemite official position is that “the livelihoods of Syrian refugees can be reconciled with Jordan’s economic needs,”¹²¹ every now and then Jordanian dissatisfaction bubbles up. For example, Jordanian Minister of Industry and Trade Tariq al-Hamouri visited Brussels and called on the EU to either reduce the Compact’s quota on Syrian labor in Jordan or to cancel the conditions of integrating Syrian labor altogether.¹²²

The economic evidence suggests Syrians are competing only with low-skilled Jordanian workers because Jordanian labor law prohibits Syrians from working in skilled job sectors.¹²³ This means job competition only occurs in labor-intensive, low-skilled sectors that are undesirable to Jordanians and where there is not a shortage of opportunities: construction, manufacturing, and agriculture.¹²⁴ Job opportunities in desirable, high-skilled professions such as medicine, law, engineering, journalism, education, and the public sector are kept almost exclusively for Jordanians and account for less than 5% of Syrian employment.¹²⁵ The low-skilled occupations available to Syrians have traditionally been held by foreign workers, in particular the 520,000 Egyptians living in Jordan.¹²⁶ As such, Syrian labor is mostly in competition with other migrant workers, not with Jordanians. Today, the Syrian workforce comprises 500,000 out of 1,200,000 non-Jordanian workers in the country.¹²⁷ And while non-Syrian migrant workers typically send large sums of money out of Jordan through remittances¹²⁸—not beneficial for the Jordanian economy—this is not the case for Syrians, who spend most of their income in Jordan.¹²⁹

Economic Integration: A View from the Street

In Irbid’s bustling streets and robust informal cash-based economy, Syrians work in many neighborhoods, from the Irbid mall, to the downtown *souq* (market), to shops in Al Hikmah or near

¹²¹ Conversation with government representative with author.

¹²² [Al-Qralla, A. \(2018\). “الأردن يبلغ الاتحاد الأوروبي بعدم الاستفادة من قواعد تبسيط المنشأ - صحيفة الرأي.” Al Rai.](#)

¹²³ Al Gahd, 2019.

¹²⁴ A small number of Syrians have found work in closed occupations, and some obtain a work permit if their skills are in high demand and they are politically connected. Syrian doctors, for example, work in Jordan’s hospitals, although they do so quietly and under Jordanian supervision.

¹²⁵ Al Gahd, 2019.

¹²⁶ Of whom 320,000 do not have work permits. Lenner & Turner, 2018. Egyptians are incentivized to work in Jordan because of the JD’s exchange rate with the inflated Egyptian pound. Minimum wage in Jordan converts to a reasonable income in pounds on arrival in Cairo. Most Egyptians do not have work permits, but the Jordanian government has been blocked by Egyptian political pressure from carrying out deportations of Egyptian workers.

¹²⁷ Mohamed Maayta, Arab Union of Trade Unions.

¹²⁸ For example, Egyptian migrant workers who benefit from the enormously favorable exchange rate between the JD and the Egyptian pound.

¹²⁹ Based on expenditures data from UNHCR and our own observations and conversations that suggest for the majority of middle- and low-income Syrians, all to almost all income is spent on the daily cost of living: apartment rent, food, utilities, Wi-Fi or cellphone data, basic goods like clothing, medical costs, and occasionally “luxuries” like a cellphone screen repair, children’s toys, or furniture. We estimate that, generally speaking, less than 5% of leftover income every 2–3 months is sent as remittances to family or friends abroad, usually back in Syria.

Yarmouk University. Syrians fill a wide range of jobs: as baristas in cafes, attendees for *narghile* (water pipes), salespeople in the electronics shops, sweets makers, construction workers, food vendors, flower sellers, gas station attendants, cleaners, shoe shiners, and security guards. Syrian street kids sometimes sell cigarettes, pantyhose, and other goods, or hawk vegetables and fruit from carts. Meanwhile, Syrian women run businesses from their homes, including cooking, handicrafts, and sewing. One woman converted a room in her apartment into a salon where she prepares brides for their weddings. These women's businesses are cash based and informal and seem to cater exclusively to Syrians within the business owner's network. We did not hear of any Jordanians who used these home-based services.

Businesses in Irbid on paper are owned by Jordanians, but in many cases, management and operations are in fact handled by Syrians. These Syrian-run shops are often exact replicas of ones in Syria and use similar names from their origins in Dara'a or Damascus. Some business names reference *Sham* (Syria) in their names in an act of nostalgia. Others have subtle political references including the word *hareea* (freedom) in the shop name, letting patrons know the shop is owned by a member of the Syrian opposition.

Syrian Investments in Irbid

Most international development in Jordan has taken place in Amman from investors in the Gulf and the EU, which has resulted in cost-of-living spikes across the city, especially in West Amman. By contrast, investment in Irbid has tended to be more locally or regionally funded. Only a few projects prior to the arrival of Syrian refugees were sponsored by international donors, such as an expansion of the city's water infrastructures by United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Southern Syria and northern Jordan were economically integrated before the current conflict, with virtually no restrictions on labor or cross-border trade. However, the border closure in 2015 has severed the two regions. Meanwhile, nativist economic policies have made it unattractive for regional businesses to invest here. A 2015 survey by the Chamber of Industry in Irbid found only 3% of small- and medium-sized Syrian industrial development groups have chosen to invest in Jordan.¹³⁰ Instead, Syrian investment and manpower are going to Turkey and Egypt, where they face fewer restrictions. Nativist economic policies also push Syrian workers to leave Irbid. For example, Al Hassan Industrial City hosts a number of Syrian factories that have relocated from Syria. They have had a positive impact on the agricultural and manufacturing sectors of the Irbid Governorate, employing a large number of Jordanian and Syrian workers. One factory manager said that his number of workers reached 770 in 2018, of which 170 were Syrian. However, he also noted that seven years ago the percentage of Syrians was far greater, when the factory employed 150 Syrian workers and 150 Jordanian workers. New government quotas state that a maximum 20% of a business's labor force can be Syrian, and 80% must be Jordanian. This factory manager pointed out that other restrictions on Syrians in Jordan—such as the inability to obtain a driver's license—make it hard for Syrians to hold down jobs and push many to emigrate or return to Syria. As a result, local and regional business has declined, and Irbid's

¹³⁰ Al Ahli, 2015.

economy has become increasingly reliant on international donors, while Jordanians and Syrians alike with the skills and means move elsewhere for better jobs and business opportunities.¹³¹

Economic Emigration

Both Syrians and Jordanians, especially young people seeking upward mobility, see no economic future in Irbid because of its limited number of well-paid skilled jobs, so they move to Amman or abroad. I [Agyead] moved to Amman in July 2014, because there are more work opportunities there. Just two months after I arrived in Amman, I got a job in the community media network, Radio Al Balad. Combining this with money my family in Syria sent me, I was able to manage my expenses better than I had in Irbid.

One male Jordanian university student said, “I can’t find work here [in Irbid], maybe I’d find a job for JD 400 (USD 564), but that’s the best you could possibly find.” He plans to go to Amman to find a higher-salary job in business administration. His classmates study French, German, or English and look for work abroad.

This is true of other sectors too, not just high-skilled work. One young Jordanian barber said he wants to go to Amman where he can earn better wages and tips. He had lived in Irbid his entire life, and prefers its slower pace of life, but he cannot make enough money here to buy a house, which he implied was a requirement for wooing back his ex-girlfriend.

Sugar-Coated Integration

Almost all of the sweets shops in Irbid are now Syrian owned. These shops moved from Damascus, Dara’a, and Idlib, often keeping their names, operating procedures, logos, and staff. For example, Bikdash is a famous Syrian ice cream shop from Damascus. The shop has a clean seating area and a massive floor space for drying pistachios that are the toppings for thick vanilla ice cream on a layer of honey. It is thriving and has expanded to seven locations in Amman, one in Zarqa, and now one in Irbid.

Bikdash and others succeeded for three reasons: Syrians brought skills with them, sweet shops have low startup and production costs, and Syrians have a well-established reputation for making exceptional food products. These features have allowed Bikdash to survive the competition of imported ice cream (like Jabri, a subsidiary of Al-Naseem Food Industries, based in Misurata, Libya, which employs 600 international staff) and domestic competition such as the Jordanian-made Eisberg ice cream (a subsidiary of an Amman-based company, Sujab Industrial, that employs some 500 workers).

In contrast, income-generating initiatives by large INGOs do consider government restrictions on the sectors where Syrians can legally work, but do not consider consumer preferences or existing skills, and put Syrians to work sectors such as textiles, where there is neither demand for Syrian-made textiles nor pre-existing skills among Syrian refugees.

¹³¹ Kelberer, 2017a.

Jordanians and Syrians living in Irbid have also begun migrating in large numbers internationally. Many Syrians left for Europe through a network of smugglers in 2015–2017, but since the closure of the Balkans route, both Syrians and Jordanians now look to the Arab Gulf as the best international opportunity for better pay. Usually men leave first, sending remittances and returning as often as possible to see their families. Syrians may have extended family in the Gulf whom they are authorized to live with. Jordanians may find temporary work in the Gulf; after four years of employment they

Syrians at the Gym: Observations on *de facto* Economic Integration and Class

Checking the employment box does not mean economic integration has been achieved. Even if businesses employ Syrians, issues of class and gender remain. A gym I [Charles] attended provides a good example.

The gym's front desk worker was a Syrian from Dara'a. He spent his time flicking through photos on his phone or occasionally collecting money from patrons at the snack bar. He wanted to take classes at Yarmouk University, across the street, but the fees were prohibitive. He also wanted to go to the U.S. or Europe and knew his only shot was getting a student visa, but this required learning English or German, and those classes were also too expensive. The gym owner and the fitness instructors were Jordanian. These men spent their time strutting around the gym in tight-fitting Adidas track suits and knockoff Yeezy Boost sneakers, posing for selfies in front of equipment, and shouting "yella, go, go" at less-toned Jordanian clients. The gym's patrons include a mix of Jordanian men and young Asian migrant men. These different nationalities were respectful of each other but did not directly mix, using equipment at separate times.

The gym was all men. I knew of a Syrian refugee mother in 2016 who used to love going to the gym, but her neighbors and friends didn't think it was appropriate for her to be there as a woman, so she stopped going. She remained eager to go out and do all sorts of different activities, but she felt scorned, and did not have the money or enough friends with similar interests to go out and engage with the city, and so she started staying at home all day.

become eligible for a resident's permit and can bring their families.

For Jordanians, this emigration is eroding the tightly-knit families that have been a centerpiece of Levantine culture for centuries.¹³² One long-time Irbid resident left the beautiful home that houses three generations of his family and overlooks an olive grove in Irbid Province to take a job in Kuwait. He makes good money there but misses his family, home, and Jordanian culture. When he visits his family in Irbid, his brothers all play music together, but he said, "I don't sing in Kuwait. My colleagues ask me, but I don't like to. It's lonely there, not like here...I bought land in Irbid by the way, and one day *inshallah* (God willing) I'll build a house here." He hopes to add to the family's landholdings in the province, but for now, that plot of land in Irbid is undeveloped, and he's living in a rented flat in the Gulf.

¹³² Levantine referring to the culture of a historical region of the eastern Mediterranean that now includes much of Jordan and Syria, but also Cyprus, Israel, Lebanon, and Palestine.

The Future of Integration?

Urban theorists predict that as time spent living in an area increases, so too does a resident's ownership of their building and neighborhood.¹³³ This feeling of ownership comes with all sorts of positive outcomes for neighborhoods, from lower crime, to better maintenance of buildings, to increased trust with neighbors.¹³⁴

There is evidence of this process playing out in Irbid: we spent time in the same neighborhoods in 2016 and 2018, and Syrians are taking ownership of their buildings and neighborhoods. There are signs of investment in renovations, putting up of decorations, and the tending of olive trees and jasmine plants in courtyards or on walls. Syrians are starting new businesses, restaurants, and cafes. They are finding work in local Jordanian shops, farms, and factories. Meanwhile, the attitudes of Jordanian residents have become calmer and more relaxed from the peak of tension around 2016. Syrians and Jordanians are growing accustomed to one another's presence and getting to know each other as neighbors. Some Syrians have begun moving from Irbid back to southern Syria as violence has declined, but these numbers remain a trickle, and most are remaining in the city.¹³⁵

We asked one Jordanian resident the politically sensitive question about the long-term future of Syrians living there. He paused, and then described how Circassians and Armenians who arrived in the 19th and 20th centuries became very close to the ruling tribes of Jordan and eventually the current royal family, even though these refugees had different languages, religions, and physical appearances. Thinking to more recent history, he said, "Syrians and Palestinians are the same now, so maybe it's easy." Importantly, he did not say Palestinians and Jordanians are the same. Four generations has not been long enough for Palestinians to become *de facto* integrated. It took eight generations for Circassians and Armenians living in Jordan to be considered *ordani*, truly Jordanian.¹³⁶

Integrating Somewhere Else

Many of the Syrians and Jordanians we spoke with in Irbid do not see a future there and want to leave. In 2018, we asked dozens of Syrians about their long-term plans, and only about a third said they wanted to stay in Irbid, while two-thirds wanted to leave, often to go to Europe. In the minds of those who wanted to stay, Irbid was described as an acceptable, familiar, and comfortable home. One Syrian man who spoke regularly with his cousins in Germany said: "Who's crazy enough to go to the West? Why would I go to a Western country where I don't know anyone [and] I don't know how they live there?" This desire to stay in Irbid appeared to be generational: no Syrians we spoke to over 50 years old wanted to emigrate. One elderly man was called four times by the American Embassy to resettle, but he refused: "I don't have a future there. I am too old. I would go there and die."

¹³³ Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999

¹³⁴ Sampson *et al.*, 1997

¹³⁵ [See reports from Radio Al Balad.](#)

¹³⁶ For more on citizenship pathways as legal integration in Jordan, see the [RIT report on Amman by Allyson Hawkins and Ruby Assad.](#)

Syrians with children were usually in the group that do not want to leave Irbid for the West. While they may have wanted to go at one point, after hearing horror stories of families unable to reunify after a male “anchor” arrived in the EU, families described feeling forced to travel as a group or not at all, making irregular migration with small children on a risky smuggling route infeasible. Young men aged roughly 13–30, however, were perceived as a detachable part of the family unit and were the most likely demographic to both want to leave and even be encouraged by family to go. “I can go, I’m strong” or “This is my duty” were common sentiments from young Syrian men I [Charles] spoke with, both in Irbid fantasizing about being smuggled into Europe and those already *en route* whom I talked to along the route in Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia.

Most of the Syrians we spoke with about migration plans—especially single young men—described a desire to move to Europe, Canada, or the United States. “Europe is a better life for me,” was a common refrain. Follow-up questions suggested pull factors included the belief that Europe has better job prospects, that Western culture has more liberal attitudes about dating, and that in Western states, welfare provides housing, cash assistance, and other benefits free of charge. However, only a small minority of those we spoke to have the money to afford a smuggler or the educational attainment to earn a student or work visa abroad. “Can you help me get a visa?” to Europe, Canada, or the United States was a common request made to Charles by Syrian males who had no other feasible options for getting there. While Europe and North America were preferred destinations, the bustling city of Amman and the Arab Gulf offered more realistic opportunities for better wages for young Syrians and Jordanians alike, pulling them away from Irbid.

Conclusion

The city of Irbid—hidden away from the international community fixated on Za’atari camp and Amman—has accomplished some integration of its refugee population, even if it is only as *de facto* integration, not as official policy. Attitudes of the host population toward Syrians have ebbed and flowed, beginning with welcoming in 2012 but by 2016 eroding into widespread beliefs that Syrians were causing housing rental price hikes, shortages of services, a security risk, job competition, and limited availability of water. And yet today these tensions seem to have calmed, as Jordanians and Syrians are becoming more accustomed to each other as neighbors. Syrians have impacted the city in a range of different ways: transforming the look, feel, economy, and demographics of many low- and middle-income neighborhoods; bringing new businesses and skills; and causing an influx of cash from the international community.

The city of Irbid has adapted to large demographic changes from forced migration throughout its history, including the arrival of rural Jordanians, Palestinians, Iraqis, and economic migrants from Egypt, Asia, and elsewhere. However, despite Irbid’s long history of adapting to change, there are very serious stressors transforming the city that are often ignored because Syrian refugees provide an effective scapegoat. Most significantly, these include:

- Rapid urbanization of Irbid Governorate since the 1970s, resulting in rising traffic congestion, rising housing costs, and high-cost/low-quality services in the medical and education sectors;
- Macroeconomic changes and globalization across Jordan begun in the 1980s that have led to widespread unemployment, underemployment, and emigration from Irbid;
- Regional water scarcity from population growth coupled with depletion of water resources by Jordan's neighbors' industrial and agricultural water consumption.

While refugees and migration have been a focal point of host population anxieties in recent years, international immigration is only one process among other megatrends that will continue transforming Jordan's cities in the foreseeable future. The future of life in Irbid will depend on how Levantine peoples—Jordanians and Syrians alike—adapt to a new sedentary, urbanized lifestyle; how economically equitable and accessible Jordan's cities can be in a globalizing, developing economy; and how the region can adapt to severe water scarcity. The long-term viability of *de facto* integration in Irbid is only superficially determined by refugee-host social anxieties, and is more deeply impacted by the capacity of Irbid to provide jobs, water, and an acceptable quality of life within its increasingly dense urban footprint. Many of these problems can be managed with effective urban planning. However, in Irbid there has been a lack of coordination between humanitarian, municipal, and development organizations. Meanwhile, population density continues to grow, water continues to dry up, and refugees remain.

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Appendix A: Background on Refugees in Jordan

By: Allyson Hawkins¹³⁷ with Charles Simpson

Jordan is host to refugees and asylum-seekers from more than 45 countries, with the largest populations coming from Syria (1.4 million, 658,517 registered with UNHCR), Iraq (66,262), Yemen, (9,839), Sudan (4,058) and Somalia (810).¹³⁸ Jordan is also host to large numbers of Palestinians, with more than 2 million registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).¹³⁹ Conflict drives many refugees to Jordan: Syrians who began to arrive in 2011 at the beginning of civil unrest; Iraqis who sought refuge in Jordan after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003; and a new wave from northern Iraq in 2014 fleeing renewed violence. Palestinians, who have come to Jordan and Syria in waves since 1948, are now fleeing again from the conflict in Syria, becoming refugees for a second time. The newest group of refugees are those fleeing the conflict in Yemen.¹⁴⁰

Furthermore, the majority of Jordan's refugees (80%) are in urban settings, not in camps.¹⁴¹ Amman hosts 32% of Jordan's refugees, "[h]owever, secondary cities and towns near the borders of sending countries have higher proportions of refugees relative to their population and are therefore often more affected."¹⁴² Additionally, the refugee population of Jordan skews young, with a median age of 17, and 62% of refugees are under the age of 24.¹⁴³

Despite its history as a welcoming haven for refugees, Jordan is not party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol. Instead, in 1998 the Jordanian government

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¹³⁸ UNHCR, 2018.

¹³⁹ UN agency tasked with Palestinian affairs.

¹⁴⁰ UNHCR, 2018, 2.

¹⁴¹ The World Bank, 2017, 6.

¹⁴² The World Bank, 2017, 7–8.

¹⁴³ The World Bank, 2017, 7–8.

concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR, agreeing to let UNHCR fulfill certain commitments, including carrying out refugee registration, conducting status determination, providing basic needs to support refugees, and seeking durable solutions for recognized refugees.¹⁴⁴

With its history as a refugee haven, Jordan has, in many ways, been heralded as a good example of a “refugee-receiving” country, due to its effective working relationship with UNHCR and other international NGOs and humanitarian agencies. Additionally, since many of the refugees that have sought safety in Jordan hail from the Middle East, some view the country as an ideal location for refugee resettlement, due to the shared language, religion, and culture with the host population. However, many studies done on refugee integration in the country by academics, NGOs, and other institutions cite tension between local Jordanians and refugee populations as a key hurdle to refugee integration in Jordan.

The largest barrier to full integration for refugees in Jordan is the legal domain and nonexistent pathways toward citizenship. There is an ongoing debate about the withdrawal of Jordanian nationality from citizens of Palestinian origin.¹⁴⁵ With the Palestinian legacy, the term “refugee integration” is taboo, and official discourse often adopts “refugee inclusion” instead, thereby avoiding insinuations that refugees will have a protracted stay or permanent settlement.

Appendix B: Background on Migration in Irbid

The historic site of Irbid’s original Bronze-Age walls is now an unremarkable, weathered mound of rock overlooking the city’s Palestinian camp, but it is an important reminder that Irbid has been an ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine settlement and has been transformed *many times* by waves of forced migration over centuries.¹⁴⁶

Until as recently as the 1960s, the majority of Jordanians lived in the *reef* (countryside), surviving on pastoral, nomadic work.¹⁴⁷ Urbanization in Irbid Governorate began rapidly in the 1970s with the founding of Yarmouk University,¹⁴⁸ when families

Irbid’s original walls



Irbid’s original bronze age walls, in the north of the city overlooking what is now a Palestinian “camp.”

¹⁴⁴ UNHCR, 2018, 2017, 1.

¹⁴⁵ [UNHCR, “Submission by the United National High Commissioner for Refugees For the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Compilation Report Universal Periodic Review: Jordan,” 2018.](#)

¹⁴⁶ Al-kheder, 2009.

¹⁴⁷ Na’amneh & Husban, 2012.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Sahili & Aboul-Ella, 1992.

moved as a unit to allow parents to keep the family under one roof even as their children came to the city to study. As the city developed, farmers from across Irbid Governorate brought their families to the city seeking new employment in construction or services for the expanding urban population. The culture of northern Jordan was changed by the city. The growing ubiquity of TVs in the 1980s and the accompanying import of international media spread consumerist culture and glamorized “modern” urban life.¹⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the Arab Gulf oil boom reduced the cost of operating a car, leading to increased congestion on Irbid’s roads and air pollution.¹⁵⁰ Since the beginning of the urbanization spike in the 1970s, the population of Irbid has doubled, mostly in the form of unplanned growth of simple concrete structures acting as small factories, auto shops, and apartments. To date, there is no master plan for the city, and growth continues without central planning.¹⁵¹

Population growth and the urban sprawl pushed low-income families out of the city. By the 1990s, they lived too far away from the urban center to easily access healthcare, banks, police offices, schools, or other services.¹⁵² By 2005, Irbid’s urban infrastructures—roads, water, and waste systems—were being stressed by a city population of 300,000.¹⁵³

The first wave of refugees to Irbid in modern history were Palestinians who arrived in 1949 and then again in 1967. The Palestinian camp in the north of the city is still called a “camp” but is now functionally just another neighborhood of the city, complete with concrete apartments, internet cafes, shops, and mosques.

The second major wave of refugees were Syrians, beginning in 2012. Some came directly to Irbid from Syria, while others were “secondary migrants,” coming from the Za’atari, Azraq, or the “Gardens” Emirati camp after paying small JD 5–20 “smuggling” fees out of the camp. They then boarded buses to Irbid (at a cost of USD 7–28).



The urban growth of Irbid from 1992 (above) to 2016 (below) has mostly been added density, not an expansion to the city’s footprint. As a result, the main barriers to service access for Jordanians and migrants alike are soaring costs and long waits, not proximity to service centers. Map image width is 5 mi (10 km). Imagery © Google 2019 Timelapse.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Sahili & Aboul-Ella, 1992.

¹⁵⁰ Na’amneh & Husban, 2012.

¹⁵¹ Al-kheder *et al.*, 2009.

¹⁵² Al-Sahili & Aboul-Ella, 1992.

¹⁵³ Al-kheder *et al.*, 2009.

Other secondary migrants come from across the region, having gone initially to countries like Lebanon. Many experienced harassment or had difficulty with the high cost of living. Of those we spoke with about their journey to Irbid, most of these secondary arrivals heard through friends, family, or just rumors that life in Irbid was much better, whether they came from within Jordan or from abroad.

The modern Irbid skyline



A typical neighborhood of Irbid, including the Happy Times amusement park surrounded by apartment buildings, restaurants, and small shops.

There are several reasons why the Syrians prefer Irbid, the proximity to their home Dara'a region usually being the most important. Other factors include the familiar look and feel of Irbid and Ramtha, which is an extension of the Hurrain plain of Dara'a, as well as the similarity of the customs, traditions, and spoken dialect between the two regions. Further, the provinces of Dara'a, Irbid, and Ramtha have a long history of social relations and economic ties, which means that many Syrians had prior knowledge of the region when they left Syria.

Today, the exact number of Syrians living in Irbid is not known, as most are unregistered. Even those who are registered usually do not update their address information with UNHCR or the Jordanian government. According to the Jordanian census of 2015,¹⁵⁴ the number of Syrians residing in Irbid was 343,479. By contrast, current UNHCR statistics say that 139,945 Syrians are registered in Irbid,¹⁵⁵ while aid workers we spoke with in Irbid described using the working estimate of around 290,000 to plan budgets for services.

Modern Irbid has a reputation for being quiet and forgettable among Westerners. "Why would you go to Irbid?" was a common question posed to Charles by Western aid workers and academics, usually tinged with a tone that there was not any reason to visit this backwater town, much less live there. Westerners typically only see Irbid on tourist buses while passing through from Amman on their way to Umm Qais or other historic sites in the north of the country.

¹⁵⁴ [Jordanian Ministry of Interior, 2015.](#)

¹⁵⁵ [UNHCR Syria, 2018.](#)

Irbidites we spoke with felt a pride in Irbid's more laid-back attitude, but also felt that Jordanians living in Amman judged Irbid residents, seeing them as backwards or provincial. "They look down on us," said one young Jordanian man who grew up in Irbid's Al Afrah neighborhood. "It's like racism." They will not remember this small, dusty town where entertainment other than shisha bars and video game cafes all shut down by 8 pm. At the same time, this relative quiet is revered by the Irbid residents we spoke with: "People say Irbid is the most beautiful city in Jordan. Amman is the administrative capital, busy, crowded, and Mafraq is like a desert," said one Jordanian male whose family has lived in Irbid Governorate since before the region had modern state lines drawn. His preference for the quieter streets of Irbid to the bustle of Amman is shared by many of Irbid's Syrian residents, many of whom first settled in Amman to be close to family, but then moved to Irbid after finding Amman's cost of living too high, and the city too congested and loud. The Irbid residents—both Syrians and Jordanians—whom we spoke with about the appeal of Irbid's small town living felt that the city balanced their preferences for open spaces and need to be close to job opportunities, schools, and affordable housing.

About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>.

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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