



# Syrian Refugees and Social Cohesion in Jordan: A Closer Look at Farming Communities in the Jordan Valley



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## 1. Introduction

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As Jordan enters its eighth year of hosting Syrian refugees, local perceptions on their impact have evolved. During the initial years of the crisis, Jordanians widely supported the call to help Syrian refugees. However, in later years host populations have developed a pointed view of the Syrian community's economic and social impact on Jordanian society.

Social cohesion, briefly defined, is the extent to which different population groups trust one another, share common values and cooperate. According to the NGO REACH, social cohesion not only reflects community relations and individual perceptions but is also a function of access to resources and state services.<sup>1</sup>

The influx and continued hosting of Syrian refugees in Jordan raises several questions related to the issue of social cohesion. To what extent do Jordanians see Syrian refugees as part of their society? Do the groups tend to interact with each other in a spirit of cooperation or tension? Is there a heightened consciousness of group differences or does the community perceive a shared identity? Given that there are over 670,000 registered Syrian refugees living throughout Jordan, there are likely significant variations in social cohesion across communities, especially between cities and rural areas.<sup>2</sup>

To gain a more nuanced understanding of social cohesion in Jordan's farming communities, the WANA Institute, in partnership with the al-Karamah Charity Association, conducted three focus groups in the al-Ghor region of Jordan's Balqa governorate in late December 2018. According to the UNHCR, Balqa hosts some 19,492 registered Syrian refugees, who comprise 2.9 per cent of its population.<sup>3</sup> Other than light manufacturing outside of al-Ghor, most of Balqa's industry is based on agriculture. One of the most fertile regions in Jordan, al-Ghor is known for producing eggplant, fava beans, cucumbers, and bananas.

Each focus group consisted of nine participants and included farmers, farm owners, agricultural employees, and supporters of local charities. Two of the three focus groups consisted of both male and female participants.<sup>4</sup> The questions posed to participants gauged their perceptions of Syrian refugees' impact on al-Ghor's society in general and its agricultural sector in particular.

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<sup>1</sup> REACH, 'Understanding Social Cohesion & Resilience in Jordanian Host Communities-April 2014,' (Amman: June 2014); <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/understanding-social-cohesion-and-resilience-jordanian-host-communities-assessment>.

<sup>2</sup> 671,551 is the number on record with the UNHCR as of 13 January 2019. Official Jordanian sources often place the figure around 1.3 million. However, these are not registered with the UNHCR - often because they are not in need of cash assistance - and include Syrians who came to Jordan before 2011.

<sup>3</sup> 'Operational Portal.' Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response.' January 13, 2019. Accessed January 15, 2019. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/54>.

<sup>4</sup> The first focus group included three women and six men; the second focus group consisted only of men, and the third focus group included three women and six men.

## 2. Jordanian Farmer Views of Syrian Colleagues

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Most Jordanian farmers highlighted that the Syrians who came to al-Ghor did not have farming backgrounds. However, despite their lack of experience, Syrians were seen as highly employable for farm work. This was mainly due to their willingness to work for lower wages than Egyptians and Jordanians, their tendency to bring their families to help as farmhands, and the lower cost of their work permits - which have been made widely available in the agricultural sector.

This expediency may have jeopardised quality, with some Jordanian farmers noting how Syrians' inexperience in agriculture has harmed productivity. By this account, poor farming practices such as rough crop handling and leaving fruits and vegetables behind during collection have created additional work for more experienced farmers. In several comments, participants described Egyptian agriculture workers as comparatively 'competent and experienced.'

Some farmers also noted that Syrians were only willing to work for short periods of time, describing them as less able to work under pressure. By this account, Syrians tended to work from the morning only until noon or even ten o'clock if the weather was too hot. Participants also mentioned that Syrians often chose comfort over income. This was problematic for farms that demanded ten-hour work shifts, which had been considered commonplace for the typical Egyptian worker. One participant attributed the Syrian farmer's laxer work ethic to the material surplus made possible by aid organisations. With NGOs supplementing refugees' basic necessities such as food, shelter, and blankets, shorter work hours would thus not endanger their livelihoods as it would those outside the NGO system.

## 3. Jordanian Farmer Views of Syrian Competition

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Responses reflected a common perception that the availability of cheap Syrian labour has adversely affected wage patterns. One farmer suggested that the pay scale of JOD2 per hour for Egyptian labour and JOD1.5 per hour for Jordanian labour had been disrupted by the arrival of Syrians, who were willing to work for only JOD1 per hour. In the initial rush to hire Syrians — which was due to their lower wage demands as well as sincere feelings of 'compassion and empathy' — many Jordanian farmers dismissed their Egyptian workers. But when Jordanians sought to rehire the Egyptian worker upon realising that Syrians were less effective, Egyptian workers asked for higher wages. According to one farmer, this hiring pattern drove up Egyptian wages. In general, participants viewed Syrian farmers not only as competitors for farming jobs, but also as a major cause of wage changes. As one farmer lamented, even before the Syria crisis, there had been 'no laws for the unification of wages.' This absence of regulation has become more noticeable as a result of Syrian labour.

## 4. Jordanian Farmer Views of Syrian Integration

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Most observations of Syrian social integration centred around Syrians in the workplace. Jordanian farmers portrayed Syrians as working within close-knit social networks, and suggested that because Syrians tended to work as families — bringing their daughters with them — they usually had

limited contact with Jordanian men. Farmers also noted that in al-Ghor, Syrian families often set up their tents beside the farms where they worked. The establishment of domestic space alongside the workplace implied a clear boundary for non-family members. As one farmer noted, Syrians were often ‘talking, singing, and working’ together in a way that seemed to exclude Jordanians. Another noted that ‘[Syrians] live alone, separated from us.’ The Jordanian view that Syrians compete for opportunities and resources appears to compound this resentment. It is also worth mentioning that because many of these Syrians do not have agricultural backgrounds, they may not feel they have much in common with Jordanian farmers.

Similarly, Jordanian farmers described a clear separation between Jordanian and Syrian communities. In addition, there were mixed responses to the impact that Syrian refugees have had on Jordanian culture. One farmer suggested that Syrians have had little influence on the Jordan Valley’s conservative culture, while another asserted that Syrians’ more ‘open culture’ has had a negative influence on the local culture.

While intermarriage appears to be a rare occurrence, some participants noted the incidence of early marriage — a practice that is seen as more common amongst Syrians who tend to demand lower dowries than their Jordanian counterparts. According to FGD participants, early marriage was an uncommon cultural practice in al-Ghor prior to the arrival of Syrians. In general, it appears that relations between Jordanians and Syrians in the Jordan Valley have not improved. In the words of one FGD participant — ‘there is respect, but there is no harmony and integration; they are not social and they don’t have the custom of inviting others to feasts.’ One farmer noted that social relations between Syrians and Jordanians were based purely on business and did not extend beyond the workplace.

## 5. Conclusion

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The transformation of Jordanian feelings towards Syrians from hospitality and support to competition and resentment seems to be reflected in participant responses. As one participant noted: ‘At the beginning we were compassionate towards them; now we are not.’ When asked — in light of the reopening of the Jaber-Nassib border crossing on October 15, 2018 — if they hoped Syrians would return, some participants responded that while they did see Syrians as a burden, they did not want them to be forced to leave. This sentiment appears to prevail despite the very real resentment felt by Jordanians in the al-Ghor Region of the Balqa Governorate. This is in part due to their sensitivity towards the ‘humanitarian circumstances that Syrians were forced to undergo and did not choose.’ One participant repeated the Islamic refrain — ‘No one eats from other than his fortune. No one can take from another person’s sustenance.’ Outlooks like this have certainly facilitated improved relations and offset tensions between Syrians and their Jordanian hosts. Nonetheless, eight years on, there is still much work to be done in order to foster social cohesion between Jordanians and Syrians in al-Ghor.



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