



SEEKING STABILITY:

Evidence on Strategies for Reducing the Risk of Conflict in Northern Jordanian Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees

Overview

Three years into the Syrian Civil War, the spill-over of the conflict and humanitarian crisis continues to have rippling effects in neighboring countries. Jordan, a nation that has been politically and economically stable for many years, is hosting the third largest population of Syrian refugees, with approximately 80% living among host communities rather than in camps. This sudden influx has dramatically increased demands for limited resources and services, resulting in tensions between Jordanian host communities and Syrian refugees as well as general dissatisfaction with the local government's response in terms of service provision. There is growing concern that, if left unaddressed, these tensions have the potential to result in the outbreak of wider conflict and instability in Jordan.

While donors acknowledge the need for conflict mitigation programming in this region, little evidence exists on what interventions are effective in reducing the risk of violence and further instability. This brief elaborates on Mercy Corps' latest research in northern Jordan to fill these knowledge gaps. The findings point to the need for greater efforts to foster positive social interaction between communities and to provide platforms for dispute resolution as a means to averting the potential for conflict, in addition to addressing current underlying sources of tensions between Jordanians and Syrians.

Key Findings

- 1. Resource scarcity is the main flashpoint:** Sources of tensions revolve around economic issues like the lack of housing, jobs and basic services.
- 2. Stereotypes and prejudice drive conflict:** Perceived discrimination against Syrians is a stronger predictor of greater acceptance of the use of violence.
- 3. Building connections and trust is critical:** More social interaction between Jordanians and Syrians is linked to less support for violence.
- 4. Local conflict management actors are key:** Jordanians and Syrians are more likely to resolve disputes peacefully if they have a trusted individual to whom they can take their problems.
- 5. Evidenced-based programming models exist:** Conflict mitigation efforts such as Mercy Corps' program have been shown to help preclude conflict.

Program Context

To address the rising tensions and potential for conflict, Mercy Corps has been implementing the Conflict Management for Syrian Refugees, Host Communities and Municipal Actors in Jordan program by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the UK Government. The program engages community members and government representatives in 12 communities in the Mafraq and Irbid governorates in northern Jordan to address the sources of potential conflicts. By building the conflict management capacity of key leaders, increasing opportunities to develop common solutions to current and emerging tensions, and creating safe spaces for both communities, Mercy Corps aims to address the underlying issues that threaten to destabilize relations between Jordanian host communities and Syrian refugees.

Research Objectives

Understanding what factors contribute to effective conflict mitigation in Jordan is critical for identifying how programs like Mercy Corps' can help prevent tensions between Jordanian host communities and Syrian refugees from evolving into conflict, and potentially violence. Despite the heightened attention to tensions between these two groups, there is little understanding of the mechanisms through which these programs can help reduce the likelihood of future violence. In addition, many aid actors lack sufficient information about the changing nature of tensions in host communities in Northern Jordan that impact inter-group relationships. Our research set out with three main objectives:

1. to better understand the sources, trends and changing dynamics of tensions between Syrians and Jordanians in host communities;



2. to analyze the extent to which Mercy Corps' programming has impacted perceptions of violence and support for nonviolent dispute resolution; and
3. to examine different mechanisms through which conflict mitigation programs can be effective at reducing conflict.

Under the third objective we tested hypotheses related to individual perceptions of violence and peaceful resolution of conflict that underpin the Mercy Corps program and similar conflict reduction efforts. Through these hypotheses we examined the roles of discrimination, social interaction, access to leaders who can resolve disputes, economic conditions, and inclusion in local decision making processes.

Definitions:

Tensions: general strain on relations between communities stemming from a lack of trust, misunderstanding, or negative perceptions of the other.

Conflict: disputes or serious disagreements between groups which go beyond mistrust and general misunderstandings, and are manifested in actions.

Violence: conflicts that involve physical altercations or force intended to hurt, harm or kill.

In this study we use a subjective measure of propensity towards violence based on self-reported support for the use of violence in different scenarios.

Methodology

To address these research questions, the study employed a mixed-methods evaluation design. Survey data was collected at baseline in June 2013, and again 12 months into program implementation in treatment communities and non-program, comparison communities, from roughly 850 individuals at both points in time.

In addition to the surveys, qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions with families and local leaders in the program communities. Secondary data sources included a review of recent literature about the conflict situation in Jordanian host communities, along with key informant interviews to get up to date information and perspectives.

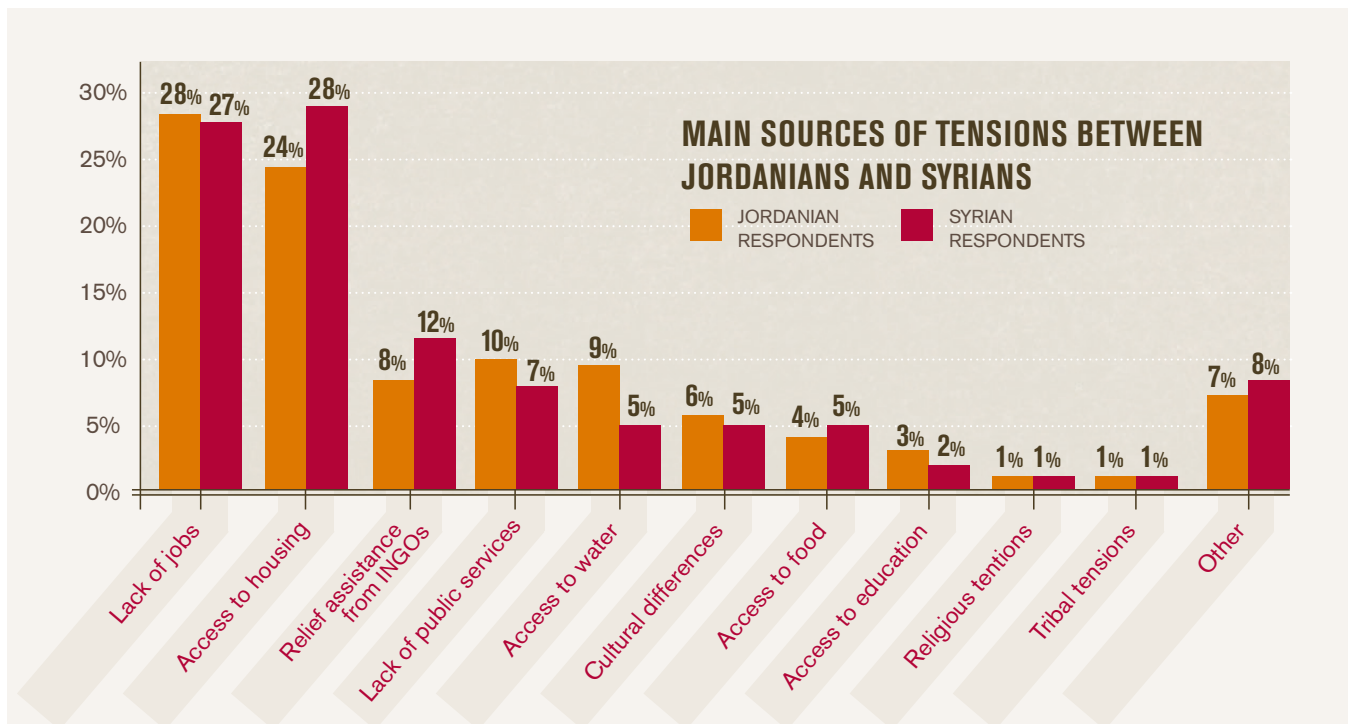
For the quantitative analysis of the survey data, difference-in-difference tests were used to assess if participation in the program had any impact on key outcomes related to attitudes towards the use of political violence. Correlation analysis was also used to test hypotheses about factors that are associated with propensity towards violence, in order to identify apparent mechanisms through which programs may more effectively prevent conflict.



Key Findings

The results provide insights on key underlying sources of tensions between Jordanians and Syrian refugees, give evidence of the Mercy Corps program's impact on propensity towards violence, and identify factors that predict support for violence and for peaceful dispute resolution.

FIGURE 1.



1. Tensions are linked to scarce resources and economic opportunities:

The primary causes of tensions between Jordanians and Syrians in northern Jordan are related to perceived scarcity of livelihoods opportunities and basic needs such as housing, humanitarian assistance and public services (see figure 1 on page 3 for details). Respondents revealed that the challenges of obtaining housing and securing work form a reinforcing cycle: the lack of legal income-generating opportunities for Syrians hampers their ability to pay the skyrocketing rental prices, which Jordanians experience as well, caused by the increased demand following the influx of Syrian refugees. The high rents in turn deplete Syrians' savings, forcing them to seek work in the informal sector where they compete for jobs with Jordanians. The large refugee population is a salient and easy target to blame for these two main tensions whether or not this is true, especially given the existence of general economic hardships and limited housing options prior to the Syrian crisis.



2. Reduction in support for violence due to Mercy Corps' program:

The analysis of program impact found that residents in communities where Mercy Corps is conducting conflict mitigation activities saw a decrease in their support for the use of violence during the 12 month period, while communities that did not participate in the program showed a relatively large increase in support for the use of violence. FGD participants described that the program's success stemmed from its ability to improve inter-community relations by creating communal spaces for social interaction, in addition to the high quality of the relationship between Mercy Corps and the communities.

3. Negative inter-group perceptions and discrimination can be drivers of conflict:

Jordanians and Syrians hold increasingly negative views of each other compared to how they viewed each other prior to the crisis. Discussions within communities revealed that Jordanians tend to perceive Syrians more negatively than vice versa, fearing their presence in their community or criticizing their cultural practices. This often manifests itself in discrimination, which was found to be a strong predictor of support for violence among Syrians who were surveyed. Syrians who believe Jordanians discriminate against Syrian workers in the country are nearly 1.5 times more likely to accept violence as a legitimate form of expression than Syrians who do not perceive such discrimination.

4. Social trust and cohesion are related to support for peaceful conflict resolution:

Positive social interactions among Jordanians and Syrians – such as attending weddings or being invited to meals – can help

reduce tensions over time and erode negative perceptions. Jordanians and Syrians who have recently had this type of interaction are over 1.5 times more likely to support peaceful conflict resolution than those who remain more isolated in groups of their own nationality.

5. Surprisingly, a positive economic outlook and perceived influence in decision-making are linked to greater propensity towards violence:

The survey analysis produced mixed findings on the relationship between Jordanians' perceptions of economic suffering and their tendency to accept violence as a legitimate form of expression. Jordanian respondents who recently had to rely on distressful economic coping strategies, such as limiting meals or consumption and borrowing from relatives, are more likely to accept violence as justified. This result was predicted, based on the theories linking poverty or material deprivation with greater risk of violence. Counter-intuitively, respondents with a more optimistic personal economic outlook were found to be 1.33 times more likely to espouse accepting attitudes towards the use of violence. Additionally, a sense of greater influence in decision-making was strongly correlated with a lower belief in the importance of peaceful dispute resolution among Jordanians.

6. Leaders with conflict resolution mechanisms and skills are critical for managing tensions:

The presence of leaders with conflict mediation skills were cited by respondents as among the most important factors limiting tensions in host communities. The survey corroborated this finding: Syrians and Jordanians who are satisfied with the dispute-resolution mechanisms

available to them are 1.37 times more likely to be willing to resolve disputes peacefully. Greater satisfaction with leaders who can manage conflicts appears to support the idea that peaceful resolution of disputes is possible and accessible – a critical step towards ensuring tensions and disputes do not escalate into wider conflicts.

Conclusions

Our findings give insight into ways that stakeholders can proactively address tensions to avert future conflict. Increased conflict mitigation efforts in Jordan are needed but, more importantly, the design of such programs should pay particular attention to the key sources of tensions identified in this study and the mechanisms that lead to peaceful outcomes. Two key components should be an integral part of future programs: 1) building the capacity as well as the outreach of entities or leaders who can mediate conflict between communities; and 2) creating opportunities for positive social interactions between Syrian and Jordanian community members and leaders to facilitate more social trust and cohesion.

In addition, more research is needed to better understand the reasons underlying support for violence. The findings around economic optimism and influence in local decision-making being linked to greater support for violence are counter-intuitive from a programmatic perspective, but they are similar to findings observed in other studies.¹ Additional qualitative work around these issues is required to shed light on how programs can target groups that are more likely to support violence and address previously unidentified motivations for this support.



¹ In a recent study on youth and support for violence in Somalia, more civic engagement amongst youth was linked with more propensity towards violence, indicating that politically active youth, rather than those that felt marginalized, were more prone to violence. See *Examining the Link Between Youth Economic Opportunity, Civic Engagement and Conflict* (Mercy Corps, 2013)

Recommendations

The results of this study have important implications for donors, government agencies, implementing organizations, and other aid actors working to address humanitarian needs and conflict-related issues in Jordan or other countries hosting major Syrian refugee populations:

- **Scale up conflict management interventions in host communities:** Given the continued influx of Syrian refugees, increasing tensions and their potential for fueling violence, conflict management interventions should be woven into relief and development programs targeting Syrians and Jordanians in host communities.
- **Expand access to conflict management skills and mechanisms:** Mercy Corps' training of local leaders in conflict resolution and negotiation skills can serve as a replicable model for reducing the likelihood and impact of conflict. To the extent possible, build on conflict mediation networks that already exist, for example, within the tribal structures of communities.
- **Leverage interventions to build social cohesion:** Aid organizations should do more to promote positive social contact between refugees and host communities. Joint community projects that help ameliorate strains on local resources and services appear to be an effective way of supporting such interactions. Additionally, in developing interventions to build social cohesion, it is important to ensure enough resources for both populations so they do not feel added competition.
- **Alleviate the immediate and underlying causes of grievances:** Interventions that improve basic services from municipalities and support better housing would help reduce the potential that hardships are used as grievances to mobilize for violence. With greater investment and coordination, directly addressing the basic needs of the affected communities could be achievable in the short-run. In the long term, maintaining peace will require creating an environment in which Syrians and Jordanians can live in dignity, together. To achieve this, the international community should work to address the structural factors fueling tensions, by advocating for policy and legal reforms that will create more opportunities for Syrian refugees living in Jordan.

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ABOUT MERCY CORPS

Mercy Corps is a leading global humanitarian agency saving and improving lives in the world's toughest places. With a network of experienced professionals in more than 40 countries, we partner with local communities to put bold ideas into action to help people recover, overcome hardship and build better lives. Now, and for the future.



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