



# Syrian Refugees and Social Cohesion in Jordan



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## Syrian Refugees and Social Cohesion in Jordan

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Social cohesion is a commonly used term in immigration and conflict prevention circles. International organisations, governments, and civil society actors worry about social cohesion where there are large influxes of refugee or other migrant populations. As the Syrian civil war approaches its eighth year, in Jordan — where there are approximately 516,000 registered Syrians refugees living outside of the camps — observers are increasingly concerned with the relationship between these populations and host communities.

Several organisations have sought to measure social cohesion in the Jordanian context. In 2015, the Jordanian NGO Generations for Peace conducted focus groups amongst Jordanian and Syrian parents who had developed perceptions of one another based on contact through their children's schooling. The discussions revealed mixed results with some Jordanian participants expressing resentment towards Syrians as a result of the strain they are perceived to have imposed on the Jordanian state. Others asserted that Syrians should be welcomed in Jordan. Additional sources of tension between the two communities that were noted include increases in rental prices, competition for income generating activities, and overcrowding of public services.<sup>1</sup>

Social cohesion may be conceptualised as a crosscutting issue alongside several welfare indicators such as education, welfare, water, employment and livelihoods, and access to municipal services. The NGO REACH defines social cohesion not only as a function of community relations and individual perceptions but also as a product of access to resources and state services. Between August and September 2014, they conducted focus groups of Syrian refugees across governorates in the North of Jordan. The results of this study suggested mounting tensions on the part of the Jordanian host population, where many workshop participants noted that Syrian refugees were replacing Jordanian and Egyptian workers who had worked in seasonal agriculture jobs. Others suggested that employers prefer Syrians as a result of their willingness to work for lower wages. Thirty-nine per cent of Jordanians surveyed reported having a negative view of Syrian Refugees in their host community, and many Jordanians expressed the belief that Syrian Refugees were benefitting disproportionately from international support while the poorest Jordanians went unnoticed.<sup>2</sup>

Jordan's February 2016 decision to provide limited worker rights to Syrian refugees has drawn widespread attention from refugee policy-makers and civil society advocates, not only for its provision of access to livelihoods but also for the reason that worker integration has the potential to reduce tensions between employed Syrians and their Jordanian counterparts. While there have been multiple efforts to assess Syrian refugees' intentions to enter the formal labour market, little has been done to gauge how Jordanian workers perceive the policy. In order to gain a cursory understanding of this, in September 2017, the WANA Institute conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) across factories in Amman, Irbid and Mafraq. Participants were

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<sup>1</sup> Seeley, Maira; 'Jordanian Hosts and Syrian Refugees: Comparing Perceptions of Social Conflict and Cohesion in Three Host Communities,' Generations for Peace Institute, December 2015, <https://www.generationsforpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/OX-2015-MS-Report-02.pdf>

<sup>2</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>

Jordanian factory workers — a population that could, in both the present and future — be in direct competition with Syrian workers for factory jobs.

## The Syrian Labour Integration Policy's Impact on Social Cohesion: Conclusions from Focus Group Discussions

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The FGDs were carried out at factories in Amman, Irbid and Mafraq. Each discussion group included an average total of eight male and female Jordanian workers. Participants were asked to discuss their attitudes towards potential Syrian colleagues, their feelings regarding the rights and assistance that has been afforded to Syrian refugees, and their views regarding Syrian business people and investors' contributions to Jordanian society.

### Jordanian Worker Views of Syrian Counterparts

Discussions suggest a range of attitudes towards and perceptions of Syrian workers amongst Jordanian manufacturing workers. Several Jordanian workers described Syrians as easy to work with, emphasising the cultural similarities between the two groups. Others underscored Syrians' unique skillsets, particularly with regard to craft occupations such as sewing. Still, others faulted Syrians as 'less reliable' than Jordanian workers, characterising them as more likely to prioritise their 'rights' above their 'duties.'

### Jordanian Worker Views of Labour Integration Policy

These discussions suggested that Jordanian workers demonstrate varying degrees of awareness of Jordan's decision to provide limited working rights to Syrians. When probed on the question of which sectors had been opened to Syrians, some participants highlighted construction and manufacturing, while others claimed that Syrians enjoyed access to all sectors and occupations, without exception.

In a similar vein, Jordanian workers appear to have mixed views regarding the opening of additional sectors and occupations to Syrian workers. While some workers supported further integration, others were strongly of the view that Syrians already benefit from generous assistance packages — sometimes in the area of JOD700 per month (it should be noted that this assumption is false) — which allow them to accept lower salaries and be 'uncommitted to the workplace.'

### Recurrent Concerns

Amongst almost all of the Jordanian workers surveyed, there was the consistent belief that Syrian workers appeal to employers because they are willing to work for lower wages. Some participants attributed Syrians' ability to accept low wages to the 'generous' assistance they receive from international organisations. Overall, the perception that Syrian workers are replacing Jordanian workers and exacerbating Jordan's unemployment rate also appears to be widespread.

Workers who have some experience with Syrian business owners or investors appear to be more likely to believe that Syrians have had a positive influence on Jordanian society than workers whose contact has been limited. In general, workers who have not had direct contact with Syrian businesses believe that Syrian investments have created few opportunities; this belief is based on the assumption that ‘Syrian companies only hire Syrians.’ Workers also appear convinced that Syrian investors will not maintain investments in Jordan when the war ends.

## Other Emerging Trends

Focus group participants in Mafraq expressed a more negative view of Syrian workers than focus group participants in Amman and Irbid and presented a darker picture of the impact that the presence of Syrians has had on living conditions. Some workers noted deteriorating working conditions — a change they attributed to the large influx of Syrian refugees. Others suggested that lower wages and worsening labour conditions were putting pressure on Jordanian family structures. Mafraq-based Jordanian workers who participated in the discussions characterised Syrian workers as ‘unreliable;’ most seemed to associate this with the assistance provided by international organisations and NGOs. The majority consistently rejected the prospect of additional sectors or occupations being opened to Syrians.

## Comment and Tentative Conclusions

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Research conducted by a range of institutions, including UNHCR, the World Bank, the WANA Institute and various NGOs, has highlighted the low wages and extreme poverty conditions faced by Syrian refugees in Jordan. The widespread resentment of the assistance programmes that are designed to offset this situation is cause for worry; any effort to debunk the misperceptions around these programmes will require thoughtfulness and creativity.

The limited cases in which Jordanian workers have had exposure to Syrian investors suggest that increased exposure to and awareness of Syrian business ventures in Jordan could go a long way towards improving perceptions.

Finally and unsurprisingly, as demonstrated by the FGDs carried out in Mafraq — where Syrian refugees account for approximately 29 per cent of the population<sup>3</sup> — location may be a key determinant in social cohesion: in cities and governorates where the population of Syrian refugees is more dense, host populations may be more prone to negative views and tensions may be greater.

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<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on the February 2018 UNHCR number of registered Syrian refugees residing in Mafraq (157,951) divided by the total population in Mafraq (549,948), as defined by the 2015 GoJ Census.



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