

One Crisis, Two Responses: Jordan and Lebanon's Contrasting Approaches to Syrian Refugee Integration



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Introduction

Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, over 6 million Syrians have fled their homeland (International Organization for Migration, 2025). Many have sought refuge in the relative safety of Jordan and Lebanon. These two host countries bear certain resemblances – they each have extensive experience in managing other displaced populations, although neither have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention (Yahya & Kassir, 2018). Nevertheless, Syrian refugees have faced greater difficulty integrating in Lebanon than in Jordan. In addition, Lebanon's policies towards Syrian refugees have been more restrictive than Jordan's.

This essay explores how the historical experiences, domestic politics, and state policies of Jordan and Lebanon have shaped the integration of Syrian refugees. It begins by analysing both states' legal frameworks for asylum, before moving on to a discussion of their contrasting policies towards Syrian refugees specifically. The essay argues that the different integration outcomes for Syrian refugees in each country are the result of historical and domestic political factors that have shaped their host governments' approaches, as well as their host societies' perceptions, towards them.

Methodology

For this research project, I drew primarily on academic literature and policy reports. To supplement this data with more human, on-the-ground perspectives, I conducted in-person and online interviews with 8 representatives of various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that support Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

Before I present my findings, I would like to acknowledge my standpoint as a researcher studying a sensitive political issue in a foreign country. Although I have visited Jordan and Lebanon during my research, I am approaching this topic as an outsider. I am

neither a Syrian refugee nor a member of the host societies under discussion. Several interview participants regretted that foreign researchers are overeager to attack the Jordanian or Lebanese governments, without due consideration for the contexts that shape their decisions. Accordingly, I have attempted to approach the subject with humility and sensitivity, and to present my findings without disparaging any actors.

Legal frameworks for asylum

The international refugee regime (IRR) refers to the rules, norms, and principles that govern states' responses to refugees (Betts, 2015). The 1951 Refugee Convention forms the core of this regime. It defines the term 'refugee' and outlines the legal obligations of host countries towards refugees (Yahya & Kassir, 2018). Significantly, signatories to the convention must commit to the principle of non-refoulement contained in Article 33 (El Hariri, 2019), which prescribes that no refugee should be returned to any country where they would be likely to face persecution (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2007). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – the United Nations body mandated to seek international protection for refugees – has the responsibility to supervise the implementation of the treaty by signatory states (UNHCR, 2011).

Despite hosting some of the world's largest refugee populations per capita (European Union, 2018), neither Jordan nor Lebanon are signatories to the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol. As a result, they are not legally obligated to recognise the rights of refugees as outlined in the convention (Yahya & Kassir, 2018). In both Jordan and Lebanon, there is a notable absence of a clear legal framework for asylum at the domestic level. In Jordan, extremely limited references to 'refugees' can be found in Law No. 24 of 1973 on Residency and Foreigners' affairs, which includes a clause exempting refugees from the requirement to possess valid identity papers upon entering the country (Al Husseini, 2023). However, the

law does not provide a definition of ‘refugee’ (Turner, 2023), and it otherwise applies to all foreigners without making any distinctions between refugees and non-refugees (Library of Congress, 2016). Jordanian law considers refugees to simply be ‘foreigners’, and does not grant them any other explicit rights (Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2019b). A similar pattern can be seen in Lebanon. Article 26 of the 1962 Law on Foreigners is Lebanon’s only domestic law relating to asylum. It has only been applied once in the history of its existence, and is thus disregarded among refugee advocates (Kheshen, 2022).

Interestingly, both governments have avoided employing the term ‘refugee’ at the level of public discourse when describing non-Palestinian refugees. Instead, they have described them with other terms that have no legal meaning (International Labour Organization, 2015). Refugees are commonly referred to as ‘guests’ by the Jordanian government (Al Hussein, 2023), and as ‘displaced persons’ or even ‘de-facto refugees’ by the Lebanese government (Government of Lebanon & the United Nations, 2014). Several interviewees argued that the term ‘guest’ represented “Jordanian hospitality and empathy” (Participant 1, personal communication, 2025). Nonetheless, both terms enable the two governments to avoid the potential international legal implications of acknowledging a refugee population as ‘refugees’. This “creates legal ambiguity” for refugees in both countries (Participant 4, personal communication, 2025).

The non-signatory status of Jordan and Lebanon, as well as the lack of domestic refugee law in both countries, have been influenced by the experience of both governments with Palestinian refugees. NGO representatives based in both Jordan and Lebanon cited the fear of “[repeating] the Palestinian experience” (Participant 2, personal communication, 2025) as the primary reason for the two states’ reluctance to assume legal obligations towards refugees. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war forcibly displaced over 711,000 Palestinian Arabs (Culcasi, 2023). In 1954, Jordan granted Jordanian citizenship to all Palestinian refugees who

had resided in Jordan between 1949 and 1954 (Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2019c). This included the Palestinians living in the West Bank, which Jordan had formally annexed in 1950 (Robbin & Qiblawi, 2022). The Jordanian government would ultimately come to regret this decision: tensions between the Jordanian monarchy and the Palestine Liberation Organisation resulted in a brief civil war in 1970-71 (Al Hussein, 2023). Although most Palestinian refugees have now integrated and come to share a “unified Jordanian identity” (Participant 1, personal communication, 2025), one interviewee claimed that the government now views its decision to provide Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship as “the worst mistake that they have ever made” (Participant 3, personal communication, 2025). Likewise, Lebanon had opened its borders to Palestinian refugees after 1948 (Secen, 2020) but most of them were not granted Lebanese citizenship. Years later, in 1975, the politicisation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon triggered the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (Beck, 2023). The end of the war in 1990 entrenched the Lebanese government’s unwillingness to integrate and naturalise them (Khesheh, 2022). In these ways, Jordan and Lebanon’s experiences of violent conflict have made them averse to the potentially destabilising effects of hosting a large refugee population. To avoid exposing their territories to instability and insecurity, they have strategically refrained from undertaking international and domestic legal responsibilities towards refugees.

In this legal environment, the UNHCR has negotiated ‘Memoranda of Understanding’ (MoUs) with Jordan and Lebanon. These agreements formalise and regulate the UNHCR’s presence and operations in the two countries (Turner, 2023). They constitute ‘alternative protection regimes’ (Janmyr, 2022), serving as ‘de facto legal frameworks’ (Participant 4, personal communication, 2025) that enable the UN body to provide some protection to refugees in Jordan and Lebanon despite neither state having signed the 1951 Convention. In

effect, the MoUs shift the responsibility of refugee protection from the two states to the UNHCR (Frangieh, 2016).

The legal frameworks for asylum in Jordan and Lebanon therefore appear to be remarkably similar. The fear of repeating the Palestinian experience has compelled both states to avoid signing the 1951 Refugee Convention, and neither state has a comprehensive domestic law for refugees. Both governments have instead signed MoUs with the UNHCR.

Policies towards Syrian refugees

Although the existing legal frameworks for asylum in Jordan and Lebanon bear close resemblances, the policies they have implemented in response to the Syrian refugee crisis have diverged in several respects.

In the first place, Lebanon's policy in the early years of the crisis was a 'policy of no policy' (Ghaddar, 2017) that contrasted Jordan's formal and structured approach. Jordan established its first refugee camp for Syrians in 2012 (Hüser, 2016) and established the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate in 2013 to handle the administrative, legal, and security issues of Syrian refugees in Jordan (Istaiteyeh, 2025). In 2013, the Jordanian government issued the Jordan Response Plan, a national framework for managing the impact of the refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2025). On the other hand, the Lebanese government was largely disengaged from the management of the influx of Syrian refugees until late 2014. This responsibility had effectively been transferred to the Lebanese municipalities, which adopted different approaches depending on the socioeconomic and political contexts of the areas they administered (Kikano et al., 2021). It was only in October 2014 that Lebanon's Council of Ministers issued a comprehensive policy towards the refugees (Janmyr, 2016), and Lebanon's open-border policy was finally put to an end in January 2015.

Lebanon's comparatively disorganised approach can be explained by the differences between the systems of government in Jordan and Lebanon. Jordan is a constitutional monarchy where power has mostly remained "concentrated in one person", King Abdullah II (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025). The stability of the Hashemite Kingdom has enabled the government to react quickly and effectively to the Syrian refugee crisis. In contrast, Lebanon's democracy is based on a sectarian power-sharing system established by the 1989 Taif Accords at the end of the Lebanese Civil War (Nachabe, 2019). As each "political party works for their own religious community rather than for the whole of Lebanon" (Participant 7, personal communication, 2025), state institutions are weak (Lenner & Schmelter, 2016). In fact, Lebanon had a caretaker government between March 2013 and December 2016 after the resignation of Prime Minister Mikati (Tsourapas, 2019). Lebanon's dysfunctional government struggled to implement policies amidst such a political stalemate (Sanyal, 2018). In this way, the different political structures of Jordan and Lebanon can account for the relative delay of the Lebanese response to the crisis.

A striking difference between the policy responses of the two states is visible in their attitudes towards the encampment of Syrian refugees. Although most refugees live in cities and villages, Jordan has opened several refugee camps (Hüser, 2016). The Lebanese government, however, has refused to allow the establishment of formal refugee camps (Nassar & Stel, 2019). Around 1,500 informal camps have been formed independently by Syrians (Turner, 2015), but they "can be evicted whenever" the government wants (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025).

Lebanon's strict policy of non-encampment is the result of its historical trauma from the militarisation of Palestinian refugee camps. These camps became militarised, self-governed neighbourhoods (Kikano et al., 2021) that were instrumental to recruitment for Palestinian armed factions during the Lebanese Civil War (Secen, 2020). Lebanon feared that

formal refugee camps for Syrians would become safehavens for Syrian rebels, as the state would lack the capacity to effectively police them. It did not want to trigger another conflict by repeating the Palestinian camp experience with Syrian refugees. Although Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan were also sources of instability in the past, Jordan has a more powerful and centralised state than Lebanon. As such, Jordan has been able to strictly manage its Syrian refugee camps so that they do not pose a threat to Jordan's security (Turner, 2015). Notably, the establishment of camps in Jordan rendered its Syrian refugees more visible to the international community than the Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Tsourapas, 2019). This proved advantageous to Jordan's fundraising efforts.

Lebanon's policies towards Syrian refugees have grown increasingly hostile since 2015, diverging from Jordan's comparatively less aggressive approach. Jordan has implemented measures aimed at improving the integration of Syrian refugees into Jordanian society. For example, in 2016, Jordan and the EU signed the 'Jordan Compact'. In the framework of this agreement, Jordan expanded employment opportunities for Syrian refugees by providing them with work permits (Jarrar & Istaiteyeh, 2025) in return for grants, loans, and preferential trade agreements from the EU (Hagen-Zanker et. al, 2018). On the other hand, the refugee issue has become highly politicised in Lebanon (Janmyr, 2016), and the Lebanese authorities have implemented several policies intended to pressure Syrian refugees to leave the country. In May 2015, Lebanon prohibited the UNHCR from registering new Syrian refugees (Frangieh, 2016). Although "non-registered Syrians can access the same protection" as UNHCR-registered Syrians, they are not provided with asylum-seeker certificates – the identity documents that registered Syrians use in Lebanon (Participant 8, personal communication, 2025). This leaves them vulnerable to deportation if caught by the authorities (Kheshen, 2022). In fact, there have been several instances where the Lebanese Army has deported unregistered Syrians back to Syria, violating the principle of non-

refoulement (Amnesty International, 2023). This hostility towards Syrians is replicated at the local level. Many municipalities have imposed curfews and other restrictions on the mobility of Syrian refugees (Sanyal, 2018). Even in the public sphere, “hate speech and violence against Syrians is widespread” (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025), and a number of interviewees recounted their first-hand experiences. This stands in stark contrast to Jordan, where the “perception of Syrian refugees is more positive than negative” (Participant 4, personal communication, 2025), and there have only been extremely isolated cases of violence.

Lebanon’s relatively less welcoming stance towards Syrian refugees – at both the governmental and societal levels – stems from several factors. First, Lebanon has been undergoing a severe economic crisis. The sudden increase in Lebanon’s number of residents has had a significant impact on the country’s already deficient public services (Kikano et al., 2021). Unemployment doubled between 2011 and 2014 as the refugee influx increased the labour supply by around 50% (Government of Lebanon & the United Nations, 2014). In addition, politicians have scapegoated Syrian refugees to redirect public discontent away from their own culpability in the economic crisis (Rønn & Abuzeid, 2024). Syrian refugees have thus been widely blamed for exacerbating the difficult living conditions of many Lebanese (Nachabe, 2019). While the refugee influx has placed a considerable strain on Jordan’s infrastructure as well, its impact has been comparatively limited since Jordan had fewer structural vulnerabilities.

Another factor is Lebanon’s historical experience with the Syrian government. Many Lebanese were victims of the Syrian government in the recent past. Syria intervened in the Lebanese Civil War and occupied Lebanon until 2005. During this period, Syria abducted hundreds of Lebanese citizens. The regime was also accused of involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 (Nachabe, 2019). The history

of the Syrian occupation is invoked in anti-Syrian refugee rhetoric in Lebanon. Several interviewees highlighted that it “does not make sense” to “spread hate against refugees who are fleeing from the same regime” (Participant 6, personal communication, 2025), but anti-refugee politicians have deliberately conflated the Assad regime and the Syrian people to sustain their agenda.

Finally, some Lebanese communities feared that the presence of Syrian refugees would undermine the delicate sectarian balance in the country (Yahya & Kassir, 2018). Most Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon are Sunni Muslim. In Jordan, a largely Sunni Muslim country, they have been perceived as “fellow Muslims that deserve support” (Participant 4, personal communication, 2025). However, members of other religious communities in Lebanon, including Christians and Shia Muslims, have perceived Syrian refugees as a threat (Nachabe, 2019). They fear that the presence of Sunni Syrians will alter the demographic balance in Lebanon, threatening the country’s sectarian power-sharing system (Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2019a). Consequently, many non-Sunni political parties, such as the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, have demanded the immediate return of refugees (Secen, 2020).

Jordan and Lebanon’s approaches to the Syrian refugee crisis demonstrate how the unique social, economic, and political conditions of host states, as well as the legacy of historical events, can give rise to contrasting policy responses.

Conclusion

Jordan and Lebanon do not have comprehensive legal frameworks for refugees – a deliberate strategy of ambiguity influenced by their experience hosting Palestinian refugees. Despite this commonality, the Syrian refugee crisis provoked diverging policy responses from the two states. Jordan’s relatively stable political and economic environment facilitated the implementation of policies that have helped Syrian refugees to integrate. In Lebanon, the

economic crisis, dysfunctional sectarian political system, and the trauma of the Syrian occupation informed the government's more hostile policies, which have pressured Syrian refugees to leave the country.

This comparative analysis of Jordan's and Lebanon's responses to the Syrian refugee crisis has demonstrated the importance of country-specific conditions in shaping the integration of refugees into host societies. Effective international responses to refugee crises must be underpinned by an awareness of the characteristics of host societies, and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

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