

Policy Brief

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Crisis management:

**A look at differentiated
refugee support in countries
of first asylum**

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Key Points

- Scale of refugee aid responses are often biased at the scale of the regional response *and* amongst refugee nationality groups receiving support in host countries.
- Biased aid in refugee responses impacts which refugees receive better access to assistance and support, based primarily on their citizenship
- Uneven aid distribution and support for economic inclusion between refugee groups can negatively impact those that are excluded from such support mechanisms.

Background

In the past decade alone, the world has witnessed the mass displacement of Syrians, Venezuelans, Afghans, and most recently, Ukrainians, among others. With these displacements, resources were mobilized to provide relief from economic impacts and support humanitarian needs of refugees mostly in countries of first asylum. However support has not always been proportional to the scale of displacement nor to the severity of needs: the Syrian refugee crisis response in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey has been notably much better funded than that of the Venezuelan refugee response in South America – despite having somewhat modest results, evident in high poverty rates amongst Syrian refugees amongst each of these contexts. More recently, the scale of the Ukrainian refugee response was arguably much better received and funded – alongside criticisms of redirected funding initially earmarked for humanitarian and development interventions in other contexts.

During the Syria refugee crisis, some 5 million refugees have been displaced to neighbouring countries, including 650,000 in Jordan, 1 million in Lebanon, and 3.6 million in Turkey. In the context of the crisis response, all of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey engaged in extensive aid agreements with the European Union to support the self-reliance and integration of Syrian refugees in countries of first asylum. However all contexts are historical hosts of refugees of other nationalities, most notably Palestinians, as well as Iraqis, Sudanese, Somali and Afghan populations in the case of Turkey. The focus on Syrian refugee response however resulted in biases in the humanitarian responses across all contexts – only recently resulting in a push for a so-called “One Refugee Approach” in the region. With a focus on Jordan and Turkey, this policy brief demonstrates the ways in which biased aid enforced nationality-based distinctions in refugee access to services and registration during the Syria crisis response.

Key findings

Improved conditions for some refugees results in negligence of others

Improving conditions for some refugees may have negative implications for other refugees not benefiting from nationality based aid. While discussions on refugee rights and access are often rooted in maintaining a minimum standard for all humanitarian subjects, privileging some groups may compromise this. For instance, supporting open borders for a single group does not restrict others' access *in principle*. However, partial opening and privileging assumedly consumes a state's finite capacity to receive and finance refugee reception and integration.

Open borders were maintained for Syrians in the initial years of the war in both Jordan and Turkey. However, as of January 2019, the government of Jordan has restricted the UNHCR's ability to issue asylum seeker certificates to applicants arriving with medical or student visas – largely impacting refugees entering through air travel, by and large non-Syrian refugees, including Sudanese, Somali, and Yemeni arrivals.¹ Similarly in Turkey, refugee registration is operated on a dual registration basis. While Syrian arrivals are able to receive automatic temporary protection, this is not true for other arrivals. In more recent years, some international protection applicants, the vast majority of which are not Syrian, report waiting periods of 4 to 5 years for a decision, whether for a positive or negative outcome (Karadağ and Üstübcü, 2021).

“All of the world accepted the war in Syria; for Afghanistan we don't call it a war.”

– social worker, Ankara

Popular discourse on refugees is impacted by media and by representation in statistics and social spaces. While both groups sought refuge in Turkey, Afghans are largely considered to be economic migrants, i.e., illegitimate refugees at best, and security threats at worst. . A media review conducted in 2021 showed that news on Afghans in Turkey frequently uses violent terms, including “death”, “bomb attack” and “conflict” (Karadağ, 2021).

Figure 1 – Popular perspectives on Afghan and Syrian refugees in Turkey

Such distinctions have particularly impacted Afghans in Turkey. Single Afghan men faced difficulties in registration as the Turkish Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM)² was less keen on registering them (Leghtas and Thea, 2018). According to civil society accounts, there have been no registrations of single Afghan men³ since 2018, and rejection rates for Afghans applying for international protection are high – often leaving them undocumented and unprotected.⁴ While there are no publicly-available figures for rejection rates, there was an increase of just 4,575 Afghan registrations in the years between January 2017 and end 2020, despite making up the highest number of international protection applicants, totalling 21,926 applications in 2021 alone (UNHCR, 2017; UNHCR, 2021; DGMM,

¹ This text does not include analysis on Palestinians, the largest refugee group in Jordan, due to their exclusion from the auspices of UNHCR, and by extension refugee responses organized by them.

² Now called the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM).

³ The dangers of the journey from Afghanistan and through the Iranian border mean that families often prefer that men undertake this journey as opposed to women, who are exposed to sexual and physical violence *en route*. Interview CS(9), 21 January 2022.

⁴ Interview CS(18), 24 January 2022.

2021).⁵ Similarly, donor and government interests were, especially in the initial years of the crisis, skewed towards Syrians; and fatigue emanating from years of refugee support has deterred any further advocacy on registration of undocumented Afghans in Turkey.⁶

Between January 2019 and March 2020, some 7000 asylum seekers approached the UNHCR for registration but were unable to due to a cabinet decision. This has left these, and many others since, in limbo. In this period, unregistered refugees are unable to formally access health services or cash support, since these are restricted to registered refugees. They may access support through smaller, local NGOs, but this would be on an ad hoc basis and up to the local charity organization. Currently, they are unable to apply for registration at all.

Figure 2 – Jordan's non-Syrian refugees in limbo

In Jordan, support for Syrian refugees extended beyond reception and well into opportunities that facilitated legal access to the labour market. This was supported by the Jordan Compact, an agreement involving trade incentives, aid, and labour market inclusion support primarily for Syrian refugees in Jordan. This deal primarily involved the Government of Jordan, the European Union, and the World Bank. Conversely, while there have not been outright legal restrictions on non-Syrian refugees accessing work opportunities in Jordan, pathways to the formal labour market differed significantly to those available to Syrian refugees (Almasri, 2021). Non-Syrian refugees, including Iraqis, Yemenis, Sudanese and Somalis, for instance, are unable to access subsidized, freelance permits made available to Syrians by the Jordanian government under the guise of the aforementioned compact. Accordingly, they can only access permits for migrant workers, which are significantly more difficult to apply and qualify for. These labour market policy distinctions reached a critical point in 2021, when a circular was released that limited the ability of non-Syrian refugees to access migrant work permits. This decision effectively ended the ability of a non-Syrian refugee to be simultaneously legally employed and registered in Jordan as an asylum seeker. While the circular was released in 2021, non-Syrian refugees reported that this was common practice throughout the previous year. This policy puts non-Syrian refugees in an especially precarious position as, in the event of accessing a legal work opportunity, they must choose between residing in Jordan as an asylum seeker or as a formal worker.⁷

Relaxed reception may bias refugee access to services

While emergency crisis responses may be drafted in urgency, the reliance on nationality-restricted aid can carry forth a path dependency in future responses. In the case of Turkey, aid distribution for refugees was very much impacted by the Syrian influx into both Turkey and Europe. While acknowledging the role of Turkey as a transit country, a host of migrants and refugees alike, crisis response appeared to target a single refugee group and deprioritized other possible vulnerability criteria. The first iteration of aid linked to the so-called EU-Turkey deal was issued through the institutionalized Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT), which has since renewed into a third tranche. The first iteration of FRiT was notably restricted to Syrian refugees only. This subsequently created a somewhat 'mainstream' response dedicated to Syrians, with an 'alternative' stream of funding that supports

⁵ Based on author's calculations and derived from registration statistics between 2017 and 2020.

⁶ Interview DIPLOMAT(1), 24 January 2022.

⁷ Anonymous testimony, 2022

complementary gaps – although this is considerably smaller and less widely reported. One donor operating in Turkey stated that they prioritize filling ‘gaps’ in the mainstream refugee response, by way of supporting refugees from countries other than Syria, effectively highlighting the dominant funding bias.⁸

While, in principle, programs rarely explicitly excluded non-Syrian refugees and international protection holders, the difficulty in accessing registration for Afghans and the skew in support towards Syrians differentiate the accessibility to programs and legal work options for each group. Turkey’s refugee response thus has a clear distinction between those that are mainstream and those that are not – those that are not mainstreamed are severely under-represented. For instance, as of December 2021, less than 4% of refugee beneficiaries of the protection sector within UNHCR funding are from countries other than Syria (UNHCR, 2021). A Livelihoods Sector Update shows that international protection holders make up only 3% of project beneficiaries in total⁹ for 2021 and only 4% of refugee beneficiaries specifically (UNHCR, 2021). Non-Syrian refugees in Jordan were only included in World Food Program voucher distribution schemes in 2019, while Syrians in non-camp settings had been eligible since 2013 (Luce, 2014).¹⁰

Bias in available funding does not only limit programming availability for refugees left out of the mainstream response, but it also biases available data and information. A frequently arising issue in both the Turkey and Jordan humanitarian spaces is the lack of data available on the needs of ‘non-prioritized’ populations of concerns, i.e. minority refugee groups, and this was partially blamed for the lack of interventions targeting these groups. As program funding tends to be earmarked similarly to funding for research and reporting, available information about refugees in certain areas tend to be biased to populations that are already of interest in an established ‘mainstream’ response. While Sudanese refugee groups began arriving to Jordan in larger numbers sometime in 2011, it was not until a 2019 World Food Programme vulnerability assessment that data was collected about this population, and other minority refugees, at scale. Moreover, it was not until 2022 that non-Syrian refugees were included in UNHCR’s annual refugee vulnerability assessment.¹¹

Similarly, Afghans in Turkey have been largely invisible in the local response and are considered a particularly sensitive population. While the number of non-Syrian refugees in general is comparatively lower in Turkey, the data gap is still disproportionate – a simple search for “Afghan” in the UNHCR data portal on the Turkey refugee response only elicits eight results, while “Syrian” produces 1032 results.¹² CSOs and INGOs suggest that Afghan communities may be under-represented among NGO program beneficiaries due to poor awareness about the particular needs of these communities. A more recent paper published acknowledges the knowledge gaps on needs and realities of non-Syrian refugees in Turkey (Memişoğlu et al, 2021).¹³

Biased access to services leaves marginalized refugees worse off

While very nationality-differentiated data is available in Turkey, data from a number of recent reports and discussions with civil society suggest that those left out of the mainstream

⁸ Interview DONOR(3), 26 Jan 2022.

⁹ Including host community beneficiaries.

¹⁰ Anonymous briefing.

¹¹ Until this point, data gathering was on a much smaller scale and by small NGOs that took interest in supporting this group.

¹² At the time of writing, March 2022.

¹³ Interview CS(2), 7 Nov 2021.

response may now have more acute needs. According to one report, in comparison to other refugee nationality groups, Afghans had more difficulties in accessing services – on average, 31% of refugees are rejected when accessing public services, and Afghans had the highest rate of rejection at 34% (UNHCR, 2021). According to an online survey conducted in 2021, 44% of Afghans received a form of assistance or aid since arriving, compared to 54% of Syrians (Üstübcü et al, 2021). The impacts of distinctions is then made clear as 15% of refugees on average are able to meet all their needs, while only 8% of Afghans are able to do so (UNHCR, 2021).¹⁴

In Jordan, data made available in the most recent Vulnerability Assessment Framework 2022 also indicates comparatively worse off conditions for refugees from countries other than Syria. These indicators show stark differences particularly when it comes to financial wellness and access to labour and livelihoods opportunities. Results of labor market exclusion are evident: only 37% of non-Syrian refugee households report a working member as opposed to 56% of Syrian households. Of those households with a working member, non-Syrian households report earning an average of JD 172 (€230) monthly, against an average of JD 191 (€255) for Syrian families (UNHCR, 2022). Debt per capita figures are also high across all refugee groups, however refugees from countries other than Syria are worse off. The average Syrian refugee individual holds JD 343 (€458) of debt while the average non-Syrian individual holds debt of JD 792 (€1059). Somali populations particularly struggle: some 99% have reported relying on at least one negative livelihood coping mechanism (UNHCR, 2022).¹⁵ The reliance on debt as a coping mechanism highlights the importance of access to legal work, particularly given that informal work carries risk of arrest and deportation for non-Syrian refugees.

Policy Implications

Aid interventions must be designed to support all refugees present in a recipient country of first asylum.

As frequently noted by donors, countries of first (and often, final) often host many refugee groups. Both Turkey and Jordan are historical hosts of migrants and refugees, suggesting by nature the presence of many persons of concern. As seen above, this bias carries forth impacts and implications beyond the initial years of crisis. As in both Jordan and Turkey, agreements with the EU and the World Bank have both supported biased outcomes in favor of single refugee groups, largely disadvantaging and, in some cases, de-legitimizing the claim of minority refugee groups. There is evidence, as mentioned above, that biased responses do not

¹⁴ These figures may also have an upward bias as this study mostly covered registered refugees and those awaiting status determination.

¹⁵ Negative coping mechanisms include accepting high-risk jobs, adult and child begging, child labor, child marriage, withdrawing children from schooling, among others...

necessarily advantage some groups but certainly disadvantage those that are excluded through synonymizing refugee with a nationality rather than a condition.

Integration initiatives must also be considerate of all refugee populations present in a recipient country.

Integration initiatives have become increasingly intertwined with reception and aid support. In line with the more recent push towards development-oriented approaches firstly in Jordan and more recently in Turkey, initiatives have had an increased focus on integration through labour and livelihood projects. Importantly, these have continued to have focus on a default priority group – shaping both local migrant labour policy in Jordan and aid bias in Turkey.

Comprehensive data collection is key to understanding needs beyond a 'mainstream' response.

Donors, UN agencies, and civil society in Jordan and Turkey frequently lamented the lack of available data on minority groups – often blaming this for poor inclusion in humanitarian programming. Just as programming may be biased in crisis responses, so too can data collection as these are often supported under the same program funding mechanisms. Needs assessments thus tend to follow a somewhat pre-determined population of concern, and in instances of crisis, specifically focus on a newly and quickly arriving population. Accordingly, refugee nationality groups that exist outside of the specific parameters of the crisis are left out of data collection entirely, impacting their inclusion in programs for years afterwards.

Mixed migration is a key consideration, especially in countries that are historically recipient states.

Particularly in historically recipient states, differentiation and categorization become less clear. Afghans in Turkey and Sudanese populations in Jordan exist as both workers and refugees. Palestinians in Jordan are all of citizens, workers and refugees. Nationality-based distinctions in refugee aid receipt may sometimes conflate those groups with many statuses, particularly given challenges in accessibility and qualification for the status that they may otherwise qualify for in another context.

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