

ALTERNATIVE VOICES ON THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS IN JORDAN

An Interview Collection





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2015

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Foreword

More than 630,000 people have fled Syria to Jordan since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011, making it one of the most important host countries alongside Turkey and Lebanon. While many in the Jordanian government are trying hard to provide a safe space for Syrians seeking refuge there, mainstream discourse in Jordan is becoming disturbingly discriminatory, racist and anti-refugee. “The Syrian refugees are a burden on Jordan” has become a common refrain. Indeed, at times it seems as if Syrians are being held personally responsible for all of manifold challenges that Jordan currently faces. From rising poverty and income inequality to increasing levels of unemployment, social tension and violence, someone somewhere in Jordan has declared it to be the Syrians’ fault.

Jordan is not alone in this shift. Similar developments are not only found in the public discourse of Syria’s other neighbours, but also in that of many European states. Many in Germany, for example, are certain that the country is being overwhelmed by the huge number of people – many of them Syrian – currently seeking succor there. Anti-migrant rhetoric and hate speech, including attacks on asylum seekers’ homes, have become troublingly frequent and a source of serious concern for the German authorities.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung works to combat racism and discrimination however and wherever they occur. Our pursuit of this goal within the context of the Syrian refugee crisis has led us to produce this book, which seeks to amplify alternative and critical voices that stand in solidarity with the refugees despite all of the challenges posed by the influx of such a large number of people. It is our hope that this book not only serves as a source of progressive knowledge on the topic of the Syrian refugee crisis, but also a source of inspiration for activists, aid workers, and other actors going forward.

On behalf of the RLS, I would like to thank Bashar Al-Khatib and Dr. Katharina Lenner for conducting and editing the interviews compiled in this publication, for their passionate approach to the topic, and not least for their success in portraying these alternatives. I would also like to thank the interviewees who shared their thoughts with us, taking time out of their days to enrich our understanding of the complex questions at hand. I very much hope that, with this publication, we will be able to connect Jordan with the critical debates currently taking place with regard to the movement of migrants and refugees across space and borders.

Dr. Katja Hermann

Director

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine

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Introduction: Alternative voices on the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan

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Over the past five years we have been privy to many private and professional conversations about refugees in Jordan, as well as avid observers of official and media discourse on the Syrian refugee crisis. During this time we have often felt that critical voices were missing from these discussions, ones that stood in solidarity with the refugees rather than across from them, and hoped for an opportunity to somehow give them a platform from which to speak. We have found such an opportunity in this book produced with the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine.

With this publication, we seek to engage with some of the most common tropes of the discussion, which tend to portray the Syrian presence in Jordan as negative and burdensome, and to offer alternative perspectives. We thought the best way to do this was by letting a number of Jordanian and Syrian voices that are personally and / or professionally connected with the Syrian and other refugee crises in Jordan take centre stage. Our hope is that together these voices will draw a more nuanced picture of the Syrian presence in Jordan, highlight the positive contributions of Syrians in Jordan, and correct some common misconceptions.

Estimated numbers of Syrian refugees in Jordan vary. UNHCR counts 630,000 registered refugees in Nov. 2015, while the Government of Jordan sets the number of Syrians in the country (whether registered refugees or not) at around 1.5 million. The majority of the most recent influx happened in 2012-2013, and in spite of notable population movements back to Syria the reported numbers continue to slowly grow. Whatever the precise number, the presence of Syrian refugees in Jordan has certainly reshaped daily life, politics and economy in the country over the past five years.

Yet this is not the first time Jordan has witnessed a large-scale population increase due to conflicts in other states. In fact, the entire history of Jordan is intertwined with forced population movements. In the early phase of state-formation, Circassians, Chechens and Armenians made many important contributions to the country's evolving economic and political structures. This was followed by massive movements from Palestine to Jordan in 1948, and from the West Bank to the East Bank of Jordan in 1967. As a result, 2.1 million registered Palestinian refugees and a large number of displaced persons currently reside in Jordan. Many but not all of them were given Jordanian citizenship, turning them into a

special population group sometimes referred to as ‘refugee-citizens’. In the 1990s and 2000s, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis also came to Jordan, establishing themselves in the country at least temporarily in order to escape the violence and persecution then being meted out in Iraq. All of these population influxes, as well as other, more minor movements, have left their marks on Jordan.

The articulation of concern has accompanied each new wave of arrivals. Today it is commonplace to hear public pronouncements and media reports repeating refrains like “we do not have the resources to accommodate yet another group of people,” or “we already have the Iraqis, and the Palestinians.” This is frequently connected to statements suggesting that Syrians are a burden on the country’s economy, infrastructure, resources, and public services.

Nevertheless, various forms of support and solidarity exist in Jordan, not just from the international community but also from Jordanian public bodies, non-governmental organizations, initiatives, and individuals. Many of these remain relatively hidden, and are only heard of and discussed among very specialized audiences. This book seeks to change that by bringing such alternative voices out into the open. It is based on the conviction that their insights not only contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the issues Jordan currently faces, but also draw a brighter picture of the Syrian presence in Jordan.

This book assembles five such voices, each of which sheds light on different aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan. **Daoud Kuttab**, the founder of *AmmanNet / Radio Al-Balad*, discusses common anti-Syrian media discourses and their background. He also highlights attempts to counter them, for example the establishment of joint Jordanian-Syrian teams of journalists. **Yusuf Mansur**, Deputy Chief Commissioner of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, then provides us with an alternative perspective on the economic contribution of refugees in Jordan. He emphasizes the positive contribution that these population influxes have left on the Jordanian political economy in the past, and the immense benefits Jordan could gain by integrating Syrian refugees properly. Subsequently, three members of the **Jordanian Women’s Union (JWU)** provide us with in-depth insights into the situation of Syrian women in Jordan, and the organization’s attempts to strengthen solidarity between women (and men) in the country, no matter their citizenship or origins. After that, **Wael Qaddour**, a Syrian playwright and theatre director now based in Jordan, speaks about the experience of being a Syrian intellectual in exile. He questions the refugee frame and the way it cements an image of Syrians in Jordan as victims, arguing that this results in the restriction of Syrians’ ability to move and pursue independent livelihood strategies. Finally, **Matar Saqer**, former spokesperson of UNRWA, reflects on the comparison between Syrian and Palestinian refugees often found in public discourse. While he finds certain areas of overlap, he insists on the crucial differences that characterize both refugee experiences.

The interviews assembled here represent five individual perspectives on the effects of forced migration on Jordan. Their purpose is to start a conversation. We know there are many other voices out there that could further contribute to a more nuanced discussion about the Syrian presence. We hope the ones assembled here will inspire others to speak up as well, and that together they can rethink the Syrian refugee crisis and imagine a future for Jordan in which Syrians no longer need to live in the shadows.

Dr. Katharina Lenner and Bashar Al-Khatib

'A bad symphony' - Media discourses on Syrian refugees in Jordan

Interview with Daoud Kuttab, AmmanNet / Radio Al-Balad, 30.7.2015

'A bad symphony' - Media discourses on Syrian refugees in Jordan

Interview with Daoud Kuttab, AmmanNet / Radio Al-Balad, 30.7.2015

Daoud Kuttab is the founder and director of AmmanNet / Radio Al-Balad (est. 2000/2007), a Jordanian news website and community radio station that strives to provide independent coverage of issues throughout the Kingdom and the surrounding region. Since the beginning of the Syria crisis, AmmanNet / Radio Al-Balad has sought to challenge mainstream discourses in the media about Syrian refugees and to amplify the voices and perspectives of Syrians in Jordan.

Please tell us about your professional and personal relationships with the Syrian conflict, and specifically with the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan.

We run a media organisation that is not commercial but community-based, so we are interested in the public issues that connect society in Jordan. We use the media to raise awareness, to do more research, and to point out what is happening in this area. As part of our work we always pay attention to the weaker elements of society, e.g. poor, women, young people, or persons with disabilities. This is because we feel that they are voiceless people who are often ignored by the mainstream media. The Syrian crisis and the ensuing refugee flow into Jordan naturally fit within our interest of paying attention to voiceless people who really have no access to the media and to the keys of power in this country.

The issue became more acute for us through our programme 'Eye on the Media', which monitors various media in Jordan. We discovered a very worrisome trend: there is a lot of hate speech regarding Syrians in the media, especially some of the morning radio shows, in which anything that happens in Jordan is always blamed on the Syrians. People are not working: "it is the Syrians' fault". People are depressed: "it is the Syrians' fault". They are an easy target, because they have nobody to defend them. As a result of this, we started thinking that we should do something about the Syrian situation. In our ethos, in our value system, we try not to preach. We do not want to tell people what the story is from on high. We want to come from the bottom. We want the Syrian people themselves to tell their story. We therefore designed a radio programme co-produced by Syrian journalists, who we trained, and some Jordanians. Our goal was to legitimise the Syrians. We did not want this to be just a side programme by the Syrians, 'here we are, we did our job'. No. We wanted the Syrians to feel part of this project, and we also wanted Jordanian officials to take the Syria programme seriously. So we

often had a Syrian and a Jordanian working together as co-anchors, so that when they called an official they could not be so easily dismissed. They had to be taken more seriously. This was a programme that went on for more than two years. It stopped now because we ran out of money, but we hope to re-start it soon.

Alongside the media training and the radio programme, we also produced some video reports talking about the Syrian crisis. To be honest, we were surprised by how little information is available to the public. We wanted to make sure that as many Syrians as possible listened to the programme, so we contracted radio stations in Irbid, Zarqa, Karak and Ma'an¹ to re-broadcast the programme. Eighty percent of the Syrians in Jordan live outside the refugee camps, so it is not just people in Za'atari and the other camps that we have to reach. We are still very close to the Syrian journalists that we trained. Many of them are now working in different jobs, so we feel good about the fact that they received some employment. And many people depended on our bulletin, so we are trying to restart it as soon as possible.

You said you trained Syrians as journalists. How did that work in terms of work permits?²

We do not apply for work permits. We give them money as an honorarium or stipend, or to cover expenses, but not as a salary. So they do not apply for a job, and we do not need work permits for them. That way, we do not get into the legal issues. We are supposed to get permission from the government for these projects, but we do not apply for anything. We are a bit of a rebellious core group here.

What other projects have you been working on?

The second project we did, which I think has had good effects, was a series of investigative reports about the Syrians in Jordan. The first one dealt with *zawaj barrani*, or marriage outside the contract system.³ We conducted in-depth research and discovered that a lot of marriages take place totally illegally and without any documentation on even a small piece of paper. Most of the cases are Syrian women with Arab, often Saudi husbands. Many times these marriages end in a strange way; the husband just disappears because he has no legal obligation. One of the problems was that no representative of the Islamic Sharia courts was accessible to refugees, even in Za'atari camp. So even if they wanted to

¹ Irbid, Zarqa, Karak and Ma'an are four of the twelve governorates in Jordan. Irbid and Zarqa are located in Jordan's densely populated northwest, which hosts the majority of Syrian refugees. Karak and Ma'an are located in the less populated south of the country, which also hosts fewer refugees.

² Few Syrians have been able to obtain work permits in Jordan. According to current estimates, only 10% of Syrians *de facto* working in Jordan have work permits. It is too costly or difficult for the large part to follow through with the process.

³ Alice Su: 'Investigative Report: Syrian refugees subject to undocumented illegal marriages', 24.9.2013 (<http://ar.ammannet.net/news/211645>).

register their marriage they could not do it, as they are not allowed to leave the camp. You also have to prove that you were not married before, which means you must go to the Syrian embassy and update your documents. Maybe you do not even have the documents. So there were a lot of details that we discovered were part of the problem. I am happy to say that after we did the research and published the report, the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf (Endowments and Islamic Affairs) appointed someone in Za'atari camp as part of a regular office there. So at least those who are interested in documenting these marriages now have the opportunity to do that.

The second investigation we did was about corruption and the selling of documents to Syrians.⁴ People were not allowed to travel unless they had a document: some kind of proof that they had a job, or a permit to live in Jordan. We discovered many cases of bribery. In fact, one of our reporters posed as a Syrian, and he paid 17 JDs to get a document stating that he was a Syrian refugee. Within a week he had a document with his name; and he is a Jordanian citizen. This shows how corrupt the system is. We were told that many officials were arrested after we published that story. Of course, some in the government were not happy, and they are now trying to raise a case against the reporter on the grounds that it was illegal to try to get documents in the wrong way.

The last investigation we did regarded the deportation of Syrians back to Syria.⁵ That was also very problematic because the government refused to talk to us about this, and we had to take advantage of a press conference with the prime minister to ask him our questions. He answered in a very vague way. We are now also in a legal case against the minister of interior because he refused to answer any of our questions, in violation of the law of access to information.

Maybe we could go a bit deeper into how you perceive the general discourse on Syrian refugees in Jordan's media and beyond. You mentioned hate speech. Could you go into some more detail regarding what you perceive as the main components of this? When Syrian refugees are discussed, what are the issues and aspects that come up?

There are three issues that are often repeated about the Syrian refugee crisis. Number one is that they are taking the jobs of the Jordanians. This is the most repeated statement, and it is largely not true. In fact they have provided jobs for the Jordanians. If they have taken jobs from anybody then it is the Egyptians that have suffered, not the Jordanians. So we think this is a false accusation

⁴ Hazem Al-Mazuni / Hanan Khandajji: 'Confiscated Syrian ID Papers and the Emergence of a Black Market in Jordan', 9.9.2014 (<http://ar.ammannet.net/news/237023>).

⁵ Hazim al-Hamwi / Musab Shawabkeh: 'Jordan puts the lives of Syrian refugees at risk by forcibly returning them to their country', 15.6.2015 (<http://ar.ammannet.net/news/251221>).

that does not really make much sense. The second accusation is that they raise the prices of rent, especially in Mafraq and Irbid.⁶ This was probably true in the beginning, but you know that when prices go up someone also benefits. So it is also Jordanian owners who have benefitted. It is true that some newly married couples have had to pay more for rent because of this, but it is not a case in which all Jordanians pay the price. Unfortunately, it is only some of the poor. In the last year, according to research done by CARE,⁷ the rent prices have gone down! This is a surprise, I was surprised too. There are two reasons for why they have gone down: the rate of new arrivals has slowed down considerably over the past year, and the housing boom has continued. So there are more houses, but not more people. Supply and demand, the formula for any economics: there are more apartments and not as many people, so the price is going down. I checked with the mayor of Mafraq, who I met at a conference, and he said it is true that the prices have gone down.

The third accusation is that they cause traffic jams [everyone laughs]. These are the three big stories that everybody mentions: *“oh, they cause traffic jams”*. I think this accusation is very petty. I tell people to go to Damascus, Baghdad or Cairo – that’s a traffic jam. Here a traffic jam takes something like ten minutes. In Cairo, it takes you two hours to get from one side of the city to the other side. This is not a traffic jam.

The other issue that is totally not talked about, including by the government, is that Jordan has benefitted from the refugees. Everyone says that Jordan is paying a price, but Jordan has actually benefitted. The economy improved with the refugees. The country has had an annual GDP growth rate of 2-3% since 2011. There is more money. If you have a million more people in a country that buy food, telephone cards, transport, and so on, then of course the country is going to benefit. Where is the loss? Water? People are paying for the water. Electricity? They are paying for the electricity. Somebody is paying for it – the UN or someone else. So I do not understand. The Syrians are also very entrepreneurial; they are starting a lot of new factories, companies, and restaurants. They are creating a better economy. I know that the common argument is that Jordan is paying a price for the Syrians, but if you talk to an economist like Yusuf Mansour and others, you will learn that Jordan has benefitted a lot from the Syrians.⁸

⁶ Mafraq and Irbid are two governorates in the north of Jordan, where the majority of refugees living in urban host communities (rather than refugee camps) are located.

⁷ See CARE (2015): ‘Five years into exile. The challenges faced by Syrian refugees outside camps in Jordan and how they and their host communities are coping.’ (<http://www.care.at/images/Downloads/Publikationen/FiveYearsIntoExile.pdf>).

⁸ See interview with Yusuf Mansour, this volume.

I have been at conferences where they have talked about the fact that the lack of work permits has forced many investors from Syria to move to Egypt. Even the mayors of Mafraq and Za'atari are saying, 'please help the Syrians stay in Jordan and let the people work, because it benefits our community'. It is becoming more and more clear that the Syrians will be here for a long time. The attention is now shifting from only humanitarian concerns to other things like work and mid- to long-term planning. The mayors, for example, are saying that we should not lose the Syrian investors. Some of the Syrians come with their factories, with their money, and they want to hire their own people because they know how to run these enterprises. They are also probably cheaper. So the mayors are saying that if we do not facilitate this for them, then they will move to Egypt.

We try to use some of these arguments in our reports. The Jordanian government argues otherwise and maintains that Syrians are a burden in order to raise funds. Fine. But if you want to be honest, they have not cost the country. Ok, maybe the infrastructure, but as I said: the UN and others have been paying the price for everything. So I think these are the three issues, as I told you, and they are mostly false accusations. Unfortunately, what happens whenever some crime or theft happens, or some political problem comes to light, then the demagogues always accuse the weak link, whoever that is. When the Iraqis came here, they brought a lot of money, literally cash money. But unfortunately most of the Syrians are poor. So it is easy to attack the Syrians. The Iraqis all applied for Jordanian passports, and the Jordanians sort of liked the Iraqis. The Syrians are not as rich, but as I said, the country has benefitted from their presence.

Thinking back on the discourse about Iraqis at the time, there was similar talk then about increasing rent prices.

Yes, that the rents were going up. But the Iraqis bought a lot of property. Most of the Iraqis also transited: they came to Jordan but went quickly. They stayed a little bit and then ended up in Australia, Canada, etc. Syrians are larger in number and not as fortunate. The Syrians have not bought property, they mostly rent it. They don't have the money or contacts. So I think the issue is a bit more acute.

Does the way in which the Syrian refugees are addressed in the media remind you of previous refugee crises, or the talk about other refugee groups in Jordan?

The (semi-)private morning radio shows did not really exist during the Iraqi refugee crisis. The radio was not as much of a media instrument. Most of the radio stations were government-controlled, and they did not usually go into this. There is a lot of competition now, and they speak this way to get an audience. So at least on the media side I did not hear as much. Maybe people talked about it privately, but the media was not an instrument for hate speech in the way it is now.

In the beginning, people welcomed the Syrian refugees as guests. Do you believe the change in attitude resulted from peoples' own frustrations, from the media machine, or from other political or social powers in the country? Or is it a combination of all this?

People really thought this was going to be temporary, and did not realise it might last this long. People thought it would be a few months, but the longer the Syrians stayed the more people turned against them. I think all of the issues you mentioned contributed, but I think the biggest reason is the length of stay. As you said, in the beginning people welcomed them but when their stay extended people became worried. Again, most of the people who are worried are people who feel that Jordan has a unique, East Bank identity. There is an East Bank nationalism that they don't want to be diluted. They have never accepted that Jordan is a country for its citizens, not for any particular tribe. So these are the people who are the most opposed to the Syrians, and the Palestinians, and the Iraqis. They feel that some of the privileges and benefits they have as heads of tribes, or as part of the East Bank population, are being taken away.

So you are talking about nationalists in the tribal social context, not in the political context?

It has some political aspects. Some of the leaders of the anti-Syrian presence are concerned about the political purity of Jordan. In their eyes, Jordanianism is being weakened. Socio-politically and economically, I think most of the people who live in these tribal areas are benefitting from the Syrians. This is because most of the areas that are being developed for the Syrians are traditionally tribal areas, especially in the north. So I think they are benefitting from the Syrians, or at least their leaders are benefitting; not the regular people maybe.

But even if you can pinpoint the social forces that are spearheading this anti-Syrian sentiment, the question remains: how does that get into the media? What are the connection points? Is this basically the morning shows responding to popular sentiment, or is there a deliberate attempt to push this?

Based on the information I have, my analysis is that sometimes it comes from the intelligence services. Some elements of the intelligence services are interested because there is a connection between some of these tribal leaders and different trends within the security forces. Those trends are reflected in the security agencies and in some of the media outlets, like the army's *Hala Radio*, or the police's *Amen FM*, or *Rotana*. They all have connections with powerful people in the government, the army, and the intelligence service. Sometimes it looks like somebody pushed a button, and sometimes you ask yourself why – why today? What happened? You try to find out because it doesn't feel natural. Everything is very normal, and all of a sudden you have an attack against Syrians. Then it becomes normal again, and then you have another attack.

So they start together?

Yes, it seems like it is in concert. There is a bad symphony that is always playing on the same day. You hear it on all the stations, and then it also ends on the same day.

And you believe it is directed, i.e. that there is a sort of invitation?

I think so. I do not have the proof, so it is hard for me to make the accusation. But if you follow the trend, you find that there is, for example, a column of anonymous reports in the *Al-Rai* newspaper⁹ called *Zawareeb* (riddles). You can then find echoes of these reports in the commentary of some of these radio stations. So you can almost see the way it works and the tools they use – and you can see it going up and down. You also see the same method being used against the Muslim Brotherhood for example. You can see that they decided they are going to attack them, because all of a sudden there is a lot of stuff against them, then it dies, and then goes up again.

Do you believe these spikes are connected to other events in the country, for example as a way of distracting the public from something else? Is there a specific point to this timing?

My hunch would be yes – sometimes elections in parliament, sometimes regional issues. But that is just conjecture on my part. One would have to look at the dates and see what is happening politically to really make that claim. It would be a great study!

Would you say that, beyond these media outlets, anti-Syrian discourse is widespread among the population? Are there parts of the population that do not buy into this?

This does not happen in a total vacuum. As they say, there is no smoke without fire, and no fire without smoke. There are obviously some seeds that are already there. People in the media take advantage of this, using their voice to make the seeds grow larger. It is a cycle. It is like a strong seed in an environment that is welcoming, and it blossoms. But I do not think that it is a majority. It is something people say at dinner time, but I do not feel that it is overwhelming. It jars you when you hear it on the radio because they exaggerate.

So they are not totally making it up. If they did people would laugh at them. So they are clever enough to use some cases. You know, somebody was robbed by a Syrian, so they take this case and blow it up. They do not fabricate the story – there probably is a story of one person stealing something from the shop. I mean, hundreds of Jordanians steal but they never talk about it. But if a Syrian steals

⁹ Al-Rai is a major Jordanian daily that is largely government-owned.

something from a shop, they make that into a story and build on it. It is what you call 'herd mentality' in journalism. Somebody starts the ball rolling, and then other journalists all start searching for stories about Syrians as thieves.

Let us talk about the lawsuits you mentioned. The Ministry of Interior is trying to prosecute some journalists from *AmmanNet*. Can you briefly tell us about what has transpired?

We applied for information, in accordance with the law, as part of our investigation into the deportation of Syrians. But they did not give us the information. There is a legal appeal process in which the information centre has 30 days to reply to you. Normally, they reply within 30 days and say 'no', and it is signed by the committee. This time they said 'no' but it was not signed, which made us think that maybe they could not get the majority to approve this thing. So we applied to the court to force the Ministry of Interior to give us information.

In the meantime, we discovered that Waddah Al-Hmoud, the head of the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate in the Ministry of Interior, sent a letter to the ministry recommending that the author of the article and *AmmanNet* be tried, because we have been hurting the reputation of Jordan. He mentioned all the investigations I told you about, even though in all of those cases we spoke to the government, we had the government's point of view, all our sources were solid, and there is not a single fact in there that they have questioned. But they said we are harming the image of Jordan. So we are waiting. I do not think it is serious. So far it is not moving, it is just a recommendation. I think it depends on what the court does. If we win the case, maybe they will do something.

So you see it more as a form of intimidation?

It is pressure, it is intimidation. For example, I normally drive to the West Bank with a special permit from the Ministry of Interior. This week, they refused to give me the permit. They are trying to use petty tactics to pressure us.

Do you believe this is connected with the intimidation reportedly taking place towards other journalists? As you know, there have been several arrests. Is there something like a campaign?

I don't think it is a campaign, but I think the security trend has become stronger and the liberal trend has become weaker. The government feels that they can be more repressive without getting punished by the international community, because of the war and Jordan's geo-political standing, so I think they think they can get away with more of this stuff.

Do these forms of investigation effectively hinder the work of the investigative teams?

Our team is very strong. It does not affect us. I support them, and we expect things like this. In fact, when this happens it actually makes us feel good – we are getting under their skin. If they are upset with us then that means we are doing good work. I do not think we are afraid because of that, no.

But is this a factor for other journalists?

For some journalists this is surely the case. I am sure for many journalists it has a huge effect. But we are totally independent: economically independent, politically independent. They really cannot stop us, but we are worried that they might use legal and other types of pressure against us in the future. We had our license renewed by the Department of Press and Publications last April. We were worried that they might not, but they renewed it, so thank God. We have had a license for the radio for five years now, but at times I have worried that they would create obstacles.

Outside of *AmmanNet*, do you see other attempts – similar or different – to counter the prevailing discourse about the Syrian refugee crisis?

There are a lot of people working on the level of NGOs and in other media. There are also some courageous members of parliament. We are not the only ones. I think *7iber*¹⁰ does good work, as does *Ru'ya*¹¹, sometimes *Al-Ghad*¹² and the Identity Center¹³. There are some good people there, and I am sure you can find a couple of other good initiatives.

Do you believe that the way to counter this discourse is through such a combination of NGOs, media and parliamentarians? Or should it be taken to other levels, either upwards or downwards?

I think it is politically very hard to affect, because Jordan is immune to pressure on this issue. They are seen as the power in this region that is helping the Syrians. But I think this hate speech is a topic that can even be discussed with the queen. She would be interested in this issue. I know we talked to the Jordan Media Institute (headed by Princess Reem), and they are interested in it, but I have not seen them do a lot of research on it. In general, I think that a combination is probably the best way. But we also talk to the EU and to other embassies about it; we translate some of our investigations into English and distribute them.

¹⁰ *7iber* (www.7iber.com) is an independent Jordanian online magazine that seeks to promote critical and open conversation about politics, economy, culture and society in the region.

¹¹ *Ru'ya TV* (www.roya.tv) is a Jordanian TV station that specifically targets young people in Jordan with critical coverage and discussions of local affairs.

¹² *Al-Ghad* (www.al-ghad.com) is a major Jordanian daily that is deemed relatively independent.

¹³ The Identity Center (www.identity-center.org), run by Mohammed Hussein, is an independent civil society organisation that works to empower people in Jordan and the region to participate in political, economic and social development and, ultimately, to shape and control their identities and destinies.

'A human gift' - The socio-economic dimension of the Syrian refugee crisis

Interview with Yusuf Mansur, 14.8.2015

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Yusuf Mansur is the deputy chief commissioner of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority. An economist by training, Mansur worked as a consultant for a variety of governmental and donor agencies and contributed regular columns to the Jordan Times, Jordan's English-language daily newspaper, in addition to the Arabic-language newspapers. He has been vocal in refuting the common discourse of Syrian refugees as a socio-economic burden in the last years, and has advocated different ways of dealing with the refugee population.

What roles have refugees and labour migrants played in the Jordanian political economy over time, and how does the socio-economic impact of these groups on the political economy of Jordan differ?

I have a hypothesis, which HRH Princess Basma alluded to in a speech at the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University, where she talked about how Jordan benefitted from refugees throughout the ages.¹ My hypothesis, as an economist trained in the ideas of Joseph Schumpeter, is that it is important for a capitalist system to have creative destruction. This simply means that organisations decline and newer ones emerge, which can do things bigger and/or better. I work for you, learn your trade, then I become your competitor, and as such I may win the battle: your company goes down and I jump up one place in the pecking order. With this creative destruction, you can see layer upon layer of growth and innovation. This is how commerce, trade, and industry expand and economies thrive.

My hypothesis is that refugees bring with them intellectual capital and sometimes financial capital. The Iraqi refugees injected a significant amount of investment into the economy. They did not compete with local businessmen but expanded opportunities for local and foreign investors. Their money was not made in Jordan, and their intellect was not trained and created in Jordan. It was an intellectual gift to Jordan to have all these matured Iraqi artists, artisans, physicians, teachers, economists, engineers, etc. enter the country. So this was a gift, which I call 'creative construction'; instead of Schumpeter's creative destruction. It does not

¹ Princess Basma's lecture, the annual Harrell-Bond lecture, dated 5 Nov 2014, can be downloaded as a podcast at: <http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/events/harrellbond2014>

mean – at least in the first instance – the destruction of what is, but an addition to the fruits of the creative destruction process. Through this process comes new technology and know-how from somewhere else. I coined the term creative construction in reference to what refugees bring with them – whether it is labour, capital, innovations (better ways of doing things), or new creative ideas.

Refugees also come as consumers, increasing the overall level of demand in a country. Markets that are larger usually fare better than smaller markets, given that all else is the same. Short term adjustments may be painful initially, not only to the refugees but also to their hosts. Depending on the size of the country and the size of the refugee population, prices will surely increase in the short term to meet the rapid rise in demand. But, in the end, markets adjust. Factories start churning and making new products. Thus, the existence of refugees creates an increase in supply, which means greater job opportunities for the refugees and their host, and the economy expands.

This is also evidenced by the earlier migration history of Jordan, where you can see these acts of creative construction. Historically, today's Jordan was not an independent state but an area east of the river Jordan, and traditionally the people living here were either farmers or tribesmen that roamed the land freely. The farmers were concentrated around water sources. Hence the farming community was not huge. The land was relatively lawless until 1880, when the Circassians refugees came. They were warriors brought by the Ottomans to help the empire lay the law. This act made it possible to collect taxes on a broader scale. The migrants were also traders and craftsmen, who built the first modern roads in the country to commute and conduct their affairs.

The Circassians were followed by the Chechens in 1902, and they too were farmers, artisans, and craftspeople. They were the blacksmiths, carpenters etc. They were willing to settle the land and actually produced four cities: Zarqa, Azraq, Sweileh, and Sukhneh. Their intellectual capital, innovations and hard work paid off as the country was able to reap many benefits that would have otherwise taken years to accumulate. So in the very early stages there were these bursts of civility, civilisation, law-abiding structures and semi-formal policing. The country started to form an identity and a resident population of refugees were settled and gained equal rights.

Then came the Armenians, who were escaping the Turks. They came down to Aleppo, and from there some went to Palestine and some went south to Jordan. They too were the cobblers, the jewellery makers, the photographers, etc. So you had these craftspeople, who maybe had very little in terms of worldly possessions because they were forcibly displaced, but they brought with them their brain power and a willingness to work. The upshot is that they too boosted

the economy. My hypothesis is that if people do come into your country and you quickly accept them, and they become part of the system – full producers and consumers – then you are likely to benefit from them on the production side (supply) and consumption side (demand). In other words, the economy will greatly expand as productivity and products increase.

After the above-mentioned migrant populations started to settle in today's Jordan, we had the Palestinian influx which started in the 1920s. Several Palestinian and Syrian families came then to Jordan and started production. There were two prominent Palestinian families in Amman, Mango and Asfour, and there were important Syrian families, e.g. Tabbaa and Bdeir. The head of the Bdeir family was the one who lit up Amman. He bought a generator from Syria or Lebanon, brought it here and started lighting up the streets. He thus started what became the national electric grid. By then the state was forming – the Emirate of Transjordan was declared in 1921. King Abdullah I needed administrators, and he was given gifts of creative construction. The first prime minister of Jordan was a Lebanese – Rasheed Tlei' – and many of his administrators came from the educated Palestinian population across the Jordan River. His administration, staff and cabinet were formed from those and others, as he needed people who could read, write, and speak different languages. So, again, you have another influx or infusion of human and physical capital, labour and consumers. The data shows that the economy grew in leaps and bounds as a result.

The largest group of refugees that has come to Jordan over the decades has been Palestinians, in 1948, 1967, plus the so-called "returnees" of 1990/1. What has been their contribution to the political economy of the country?

If you track the figures and the data, you will see bumps in the GDP. The biggest jumps in the modern history of Jordan came immediately after 1948 due to the largest influx of people in relation to the population: the forced displacement of Palestinians. If you look at the year after 1948, the economy went up by something like 40%. This was because the population almost doubled and people brought not only some of their belongings with them but also what they could muster in savings, and of course their skills and talents. They needed housing, food, restaurants, etc., so they began to make these. They brought with them their trades and learning, and they invested these in the country as they became citizens and co-founders of the modern Jordanian state. What Jordan did right was to give them citizenship, allowing people to live as full-fledged citizens. In Europe, in comparison, you could see that certain countries were not so friendly towards immigrants. They were at first, and their economies boomed. But when they became hostile to migrants, following a strategy of segregation and exclusion from normalcy and the benefits of being citizens in a developed economy, they only hurt themselves in the long term. On the other hand, a nation that took in refugees tended to flourish. A clear example of that is the US.

The year 1967 brought in more Palestinians, and yes, there was a boom after that. We did lose the revenue from tourism for several years² and the country became destabilised, but afterwards it re-stabilised and kept surging ahead. In 1990/91, we received the repatriated Jordanians from Kuwait. The numbers are still iffy. Public statements used to speak of about half a million people. In review, the number may have been closer to about 300,000. They too brought with them savings, compensations from the UN, their families, and human capital etc. They needed housing, so there was a housing boom; land and real estate prices jolted upward. They brought with them new demand because they were big spenders, and they had been large earners in relation to the size of the Jordanian economy. They were also the best-trained work force that we had, as the Gulf had attracted (and continues to attract) the best and brightest from Jordan. So when they came to Jordan, they gave us this once lost gift of intellectual capital. Their savings were also invested in Jordan, and again there was a huge spike in 1992. The GDP went up by 16% in real terms as a result. This helped boost the economy for a couple of years. Unfortunately, the economy itself was not ready. Bureaucracy and the business environment had not adjusted to make sustainable the gains from this new boost to the economy. The dynamics were not in place to accommodate large investments and the majority of investment went into the real estate market. What does an immigrant who lost his home want to do first? Build a new home. So real estate became the mainstay of economic growth in Jordan throughout the years. If you were a landlord or inherited large tracts of land, and if you managed to not sell them, you would have become extremely rich over the years.

How about the Iraqi refugees?

In the 1990s, we received the Shiite refugees escaping the persecution of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. They did not have much of an impact as their numbers were few, but again they helped grow the economy. We benefitted from them in the creation of private universities. I believe that private universities would not have emerged had there not been Iraqi teachers willing to work for under \$1,000 per month even though they were trained in some of the best Western universities. So we had first-rate researchers, scholars, doctors, physicians, etc. that worked for lower wages and filled a gap. They were a bonus in terms of human capital. Some worked informally because the government would not give them work permits. Iraqi artists, whose paintings now sell in the thousands if not hundreds of thousands, would sell their paintings initially for \$50 just to put food on the table; such paintings and works are worth a thousand times that if not more. So yes, we benefitted!

² This was due to the fact that the West Bank and Jerusalem, important tourist hubs, were occupied by Israel in 1967.

Then we go on to 2003³, when we started receiving the wealthy Iraqis – the ones who made it during the Saddam era. Some came with money and some started to produce in the country as they opened factories. Between 2004 and 2008 you had what I call the golden years: five years where we averaged a GDP per capita growth rate of close to 8% in real terms. An enviable growth – but again, the growth was mainly in real estate. This time the investment went mainly into real estate, not just because some refugees were looking for homes to host their families but also because they constructed offices, office buildings, and things like that. They invested their money in real estate, which in our part of the world is the safest form of investment. In a third world economy you always look for real estate, because you own that property and the laws on that are not likely to change very quickly; thus real estate is viewed as a safe haven.

Did the ways in which Jordan's rulers received refugees change over time? If yes, how so?

In the past, we managed to take in refugees in a highly beneficial manner. Before the modern state of Jordan, before the 1950s, people were integrated quickly and hence went on to make a people. After the population expanded and became educated or conversant in modern systems of work and governance, there emerged a form of relative discrimination against newcomers. The newcomers were constantly viewed as competitors and were consequently excluded, or found it more and more difficult to participate as fully as they did in the past. I am not saying that everybody thought this, but overall, refugees were perceived as competitors who came to share in the pie.

But they were also a gift to the government, since the government was able to receive tons of aid because it was a recipient of these refugees. It was advantageous, as it has been in many other countries, to portray the refugees as helpless, poor, and dependent; and as consumers rather than possible producers. Hence, some were kept in refugee camps and could never become full producers or perceived competitors. So it was a self-fulfilling prophecy: the refugees were needy, hence they became such, and the country benefited less from their influx. But they became a source of external revenue for the state as they imposed some pressure on the infrastructure. The state welcomed these revenues, because they enabled it to pay rent to the people of the country, or to those that it employed in an ever burgeoning bureaucracy.

How have the Syrian refugees been received?

We started receiving Syrian refugees in 2011/12, and we saw a pattern repeating itself. We saw a similar attitude to that expressed toward some of the Iraqi

³ In 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein's regime.

refugees after 2003. In the golden years, 2004-2008, the cost of hosting the refugees was somewhat exaggerated, in my view. Talk was of about half a million Iraqi refugees, when in fact, with some little investigation, one would find out that the number was closer to 170,000 – yet this number emerged only years later and not from official sources. Many of the refugees also ended up not staying because of the exclusion they faced from full participation in the host country.

I saw a similar pattern emerging with the Syrian refugees. People would say ‘the refugees are the cause of the inflation.’ But let us put this in context. Jordan imports 96% of its energy, and 87% of its caloric intake. So 87% of the food you consume here is imported. This means that when you have more people, when refugees come in, you just buy larger shipments. When you buy larger shipments you receive greater discounts. So actually they should have brought the prices down, not increased them. You could buy a ship that carries 60,000 tons of sugar at 30% less than if you had bought 30,000 tons. So your discounts are greater, and there is no justification for prices going up, except for monopolistic and rentier behaviour. So refugees should have been beneficial in terms of lowering food prices.

At the same time, the refugees started coming into Jordan when it was facing the dilemma of losing its gas supply from Egypt. The gas pipeline was being cut off constantly because of trouble in Egypt that was related to the Arab Spring. The government wanted alternatives, so it had to import more fuel from elsewhere to make up for the loss of the Egyptian gas supply. By now, overall fuel imports make up about 20-25% of GDP. The government wanted to increase energy prices due to the prescriptions of the IMF,⁴ and increase taxes.

The Syrian refugees were a handy excuse for everything that went bad. Some would scream, ‘How can we feed them?’ Well, you import more food. ‘They are killing our water supply’ – they actually live as squatters, and in refugee camps, so they do not have showers and flushing toilets, and consequently use very little water. You can see this when you go to Za’atari camp.⁵ ‘They are getting water for free’ – this is bogus. They are not getting water for free. UNICEF⁶ buys them the water, WFP⁷ buys them food coupons, another donor agency provides them

⁴ Jordan has been undergoing a second round of IMF-mandated structural adjustment since 2012, which has included many sensitive and controversial public spending cuts. The first round took place from 1989 to 2004.

⁵ Za’atari camp was established in July 2012 in Mafraq governorate and is the largest refugee camp for Syrians in Jordan. It currently hosts around 83,000 refugees.

⁶ The UN Children’s Rights and Emergency Relief Organisation (UNICEF) is a United Nations programme that provides long-term humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers in developing countries.

⁷ The World Food Programme (WFP) is the food assistance branch of the United Nations and the world’s largest humanitarian organisation addressing hunger and promoting food security.

with gas cylinders. UNHCR⁸ provides the tents – so each UN agency is providing them with something.

The private sector, which is largely a rentier private sector, also blamed the refugees. Higher energy prices meant their costs were higher, and they were becoming less price-competitive world-wide. They too blamed the Syrians, although some did blame the government.

What other charges regarding the socio-economic effects of the Syrian presence do you make out, and how would you counter them?

You know, I was on TV once, and a teacher came up and said: 'our schools are taking on double the number of students because of the Syrians.' The claim was simply wrong. Irbid and Mafrq, the highest recipients of refugees, saw an increase in the student population by 11% – that means two more students in a class of twenty. That is hardly double, but that is on average.

The larger problem is that the Syrians in Jordan have had a fragmented impact in certain areas where the infrastructure was already very weak, or non-existent. Some schools only have ten students; some are nothing more than a rented room. This is because according to the education law, if there are ten students or more in a village or population centre, then you have to open a school. Instead of bussing students into one school from different communities and creating a large school where you enjoy economies of scale, we think we are so rich that we can build a school for ten students, and with that you have to have an administrator, a principal, a janitor, a building, etc. So they started renting and the Ministry of Education does not have ample funds for the required maintenance.

The government was asking for money, it could not increase the aid received significantly unless it raised the infrastructure issue. In other words, because of the refugees, we said we needed to upgrade the infrastructure of Jordan. But that is only a valid claim if we do keep the refugees for the long haul, and they become citizens.

The refugees were also blamed for unemployment. But they actually created jobs. The myth, which is known in economics as the zero-sum fallacy, is that when refugees come all they do is compete for jobs. But they actually create demand and improve productivity, and thus create more jobs for the host population.

The common discourse at the moment is that Syrians are crowding out Jordanians from specific sectors.

⁸ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a United Nations agency mandated to protect and support refugees at the request of a government or the UN itself. It also assists in their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country.

Yes, let's talk about employment and unemployment first, and then deal with this charge. We have a Gulf that pays seven times your salary in Jordan. There are about 260,000 to 270,000 Jordanians working in the Gulf, or about 14% of the labour force. These are the best ones, the *crème de la crème*. They remit about 10% of the GDP per year, so they help boost the foreign reserves and support the balance of payments. Workers in the Gulf are as important as tourism. They take their families with them, so there are about 600,000 Jordanians – about 10% of the population – living overseas. This reduces stress on the state. We have a government that employs somewhere between 42% and 45% of the labour force. If you add pensioners to it, then you have about 60% of the Jordanian labour force receiving salaries from the government. So this labour market is distorted, because even if I do not work, as long as one of my family members is working in the Gulf he or she will pay the bills. If I do not work, it is because I am waiting for a government job. And when I go and work for the government I do not do any work, because I am the son of so-and-so.

So, as for crowding Jordanians out of the labour market: we have this distorted market. Until 1976 the unemployment rate was under 2%. After that it kept rising by about 1% each year. And then in the last three decades, we got used to unemployment rates of above 10%. When I was a child, the maid was Jordanian, so was the car washer, the waiter – all these jobs were occupied by Jordanians. There was no 'culture of shame'.

Now to the question: Do new immigrants crowd out the Jordanian workers? The answer is: not really. Three years ago, I read that the Department of Statistics, the official source of all information in Jordan, stated that only 5% of Jordanians are willing to accept menial work. This is why we have between 600,000 and 800,000 Egyptian workers; 70% of them have a legal status, the rest are working illegally. These workers became informally integrated into the system. If you wanted to get your car washed, guest workers would wash your car. If you wanted to farm, you would hire a guest worker. It was the same if you wanted a baker, a waiter, or anything that a Jordanian was 'too proud' to do. I put this in quotes because in the past we were not so proud. We only became proud because there is no urgency to find work. If I wait among the unemployed, my brother or cousin in the Gulf will pay my livelihood. I will wait for the government post, whereby I sit behind the desk and make a decent salary.

When the Syrians came, they competed with the Egyptians, not with the Jordanian workers. They of course work in the informal sector, because we do not give them work permits.

And this is in construction or agriculture?

This is in any job that an Egyptian would do. We are talking about refugees who have nothing, who want to work and feed the family. Some already sold their jewellery. When I did interviews in Mafraq, an area heavily populated with refugees, I was told that the Syrians would work at night so they would not be caught. Imagine, by excluding the refugees from work, they were working the graveyard shifts and were taking something like five Jordanian dinars per shift. Guess who was jealous of them? It was not the Jordanian workers who reported them to the police but the Egyptian workers, because they saw Syrians as direct competitors.

Is there any field where you think there has actually been a negative impact?

The only truly negative impact that you could talk about is water, as Jordan is the third poorest country in the world in terms of water consumption. But Jordan's water scarcity is hardly the fault of Syrian refugees alone. For the past 30-odd years, we have been talking about the Red-Dead Canal. We had been talking about the Disi aquifer since 1977, and we only implemented it just recently. It became operational around three years ago. The Syrians' consumption of water is disproportionately low, because they do not live under conditions similar to Jordanians. They are not taking three showers a day. Their consumption of water is one-sixth that of a Jordanian, and the same goes for electricity.

So apparently the negative socio-economic impacts from the Syrian refugee crisis on Jordan have been quite limited.

Indeed. Now, we should also have benefitted in terms of Arab inward tourism. There were less Jordanians that were going to spend money in Syria, so they were looking for Jordanian tourist sites. We should also have benefitted from the fact that Gulf tourists could not go by car to Syria to spend their vacation. They used to go to Jordan, stay one night, and then head to Syria the next day refreshed, and spend the rest of their vacation in Syria or Lebanon. With Lebanon being blocked by Israel in the south and Syria from everywhere else but the sea, Lebanon was beyond reach to the Gulf tourists – which make up 80% of our tourists! So Lebanon was semi-closed, and it suffered some turmoil. If you remember, they abducted one or two Gulf citizens, and the incidents pretty much killed the tourism season there. Syria was out of the question; Egypt as well. So the countries that were our traditional competitors were completely closed. Tourism in Jordan should have picked up, yet it didn't.

What role does the presence of a large number of humanitarian UN and other aid agencies have in terms of the country's political economy?

The UN organisations are one culprit in this whole game that I have not mentioned yet. People forget that the UN and aid agencies tend to work in terms of crisis. Crisis to them is business. The more refugees there are, the more money they make from donors, and because they take a percentage for administration, the more people they hire, the more prestige this or that UN bureaucrat gains. If refugees were given work permits, then they would be capable of providing for themselves, and they would not need UN agencies to provide them with aid. But if they are not given these work permits, then they will be completely dependent on aid. More aid means more work for the aid agencies. They go about saying how dastardly the situation is, how bad things are. They too become conspirators, in that they exaggerate the size of the dependence so that they can control more flows and take their cut of a bigger pie. One agency takes about 14% of the aid for administration, so it can hire consultants and this and that. Its prestige grows, their bureaucrats are suddenly in the press, and the UN headquarters looks at them and contacts them. They have been in oblivion for the past ten years, but now their future is more secure the more crises there are.

That is true. They were thinking about shutting down UNHCR.

Yes, and now it blossoms. The Iraqi crisis re-made the UN. Had they not sided with Bush in the Iraq conflict, things would have been very different. But this way aid from the US flowed, and then the refugees – so it was business. Their business is the misery of others.

How about the donor countries' role in this? USAID has studied the formalisation of Syrian labour in the country and the benefits of that for the economy and the government, and GIZ are on the same page. Do you see a conflict between donor countries and the UN agencies?

Those in the business of administering aid want more money. Donors want to graduate out of giving money. I was called by USAID to discuss this. They were looking at ways and means of integrating this labour into the market. For instance, the Syrian workers are craftspeople – they have been producing hand-crafted furniture for over 4,000 years. Jordan imports furniture from either Bethlehem or Syria for the tourists because we do not have this craft, whereas they mastered it.

One of the big red lines regarding Syrian refugees is giving them work permits; how would you explain this aversion? Legally speaking it is a grey zone, but the question is: where does this de facto refusal come from? Is this more of a symbolic identity thing, or is it about economic benefits?

Why would Jordan not provide work permits? First of all, the masses think that each foreigner who comes into this country takes a Jordanian's job. It is called the fixity of the quantity of labour. But it is a fallacy! As I mentioned before, when labour comes in, they are also consumers, so they create jobs.

Second, there is the security issue. When I was a columnist, I wrote in my columns: why not just give them these GPS cards or bracelets and identify them, and then you can view them wherever they are? They are going to work anyway, and this way you can benefit from the taxes they pay, in contrast to now. Plus they would be able to make more money because they would be formalised.

So what would you say are the ways to get out of this vicious circle?

Work permits – integrate them into society! Benefit for once from these horrible circumstances that gave you a human gift! A human being that is willing to work and consume in your country, and bring in his craft, knowledge, cultural heritage; the contribution to the creative industries, to the arts, to design – to everything! Syrians are really sophisticated producers and consumers. We should not squander this human talent, this pure gift out of others' misery. Unfortunately, all of this is not even part of the discourse.

‘Uncategorising Women’ – Women in the Syrian refugee crisis

Interview with the Jordanian Women’s Union (Mrs. Mukarram Odeh – JWU Programme Manager; Mrs. Alia Hijjawi – Syrian Women Unit Coordinator; Mrs. Ghada Zua’ayter – Syrian Volunteer), 10.8.2015

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The Jordanian Women’s Union (JWU), headquartered in Amman, is a non-governmental organisation committed to improving the status of women in the country. It is one of the most prominent and influential women’s organisations in the Arab world and has established strong networks with other women’s movements both in Jordan and around the globe. The JWU was established in 1945, however it was forced to close when martial law was declared in 1957 and all non-governmental organisations were dissolved. JWU re-emerged in 1974, continuing its activities until 1981 when it was once again compelled to discontinue its operations. It resumed operation in 1989 when Jordan’s political life was liberalised and constraints on civil society were relaxed.

How does JWU perceive the situation of women refugees in Jordan, especially Syrian refugees?

The Syrian refugee influx into Jordan and the past five years of war in Syria have caused different and contradictory political opinions to emerge within Jordanian society. In the JWU we chose to distance ourselves from these opinions and to work with women as women regardless of their citizenship or where they come from, and without categorising them into different groups. If you believe in women’s rights then this position is absolute: it should not be limited or restricted. Historically, women are deprived of a lot of rights in our region, which makes them one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. Women’s vulnerability is compounded when they are refugees. They lose their homes, lands, families, and economic resources, not to mention the alienation and difficulty they face in adapting to a new society. The resulting forms of vulnerability are countless. Violence against Syrian women occurs on two levels: the first is the violence against women in general, and the second is the violence caused by the refugee experience, in the course of which many women lose basic skills and means of survival. As a result, they need various forms of service provision and training on women’s empowerment and income generating activities.

What role has JWU played during the Syria crisis so far? What are your main areas of intervention?

Our normal course of action is to provide women with protection from the different forms of violence that they face, including armed conflict, poverty, economic exploitation and oppression. In addition to this we provide needed health, social, psychological and legal services. JWU's hotline, for example, provides services for all women in Jordan regardless of the form of violence they face. Syrian women are part of the society and thus are included in these services. However, given the emergency involved and the need for quicker responses, our service provision to them has been more intensive than normal. At the beginning of the crisis we were in the field every day – both in refugee camps and host communities – to help with the arrival of new refugee families. Our most important task was reaching Syrian women upon arrival to assess their situation and to provide them with our health, social, psychological, and legal services and contacts.

Becoming a refugee can also create a special situation for some women – so-called 'breadwinner women' – wherein they become the primary earners due to the absence of the traditional breadwinner: the husband, the father or the brother. We offer vocational training programmes that teach women about income-generating activities they can do from their homes, where they are in a safe environment with their children.

The confusion around what to do with school-age Syrian children created another area of intervention for us. Students have generally lost their schools, books and academic certificates. We conducted home visits to advocate for the "back to school" campaigns¹ and to facilitate the process of registering Syrian children in the Ministry of Education's public schools. We also used existing classes in the 12 branches of the JWU² to offer compensation classes for Syrian children. We also covered the transportation fees for Syrian girls in order to encourage families to send them back to school, and we are working on limiting Syrian girls' early marriage. This is a very important issue for JWU. In addition, we worked on providing services for people with disabilities.

In host communities, we often intervene as mediators for Syrians registered with us, applying conflict resolution mechanisms in order to ease tensions and support the affected family. This may involve providing services or representing them in governmental institutions. Dealing with host communities as well as

¹ "Back to school" campaigns have been mainly supported by UNICEF and Save the Children in Jordan to encourage families to enroll their children in schools.

² The Jordanian Women's Union has a branch in each of the 12 Jordanian governorates.

refugees has led us to create programmes that cover both Jordanian and Syrian women. These programmes are mainly directed toward open discussion and the presentation of the problems women and in particular refugee women face. We have found that airing these issues openly leads to a sense of solidarity as well as an exchange of ideas and possible solutions.

We have also run events for Jordanian and Syrian children between the ages of five and 17, who have experienced tension with their peers. We've found that once they participated in these events they became more familiar with each other and their relations became more normal.

As Jordanian activists, we are pushing for the government of Jordan to adopt UN resolution 1325 (Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security)³. We have already trained our staff on its details and application. Adopting and applying it would help a lot in the case of Syrian women, especially in cases of harassment and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against refugee women and girls.

JWU has previous experience with Iraqi women. How do you compare that to working with Syrian women?

The situation of Iraqi women was different from that of Syrian women. We provided similar services for them and hosted many at our safe houses, but they were referred to us by UNHCR because their focus was on applying for asylum. They saw asylum in Europe, Canada, Australia or the United States as the solution to their situation. Syrian women, in general, did not apply for asylum at the beginning, so our interventions were fast and we interacted directly with them. Services have also been delivered through CBOs and UNRWA's Women Programmes Centres⁴ (WPCs), as a lot of Syrian families reside in Palestinian refugee camps because the rents there are significantly cheaper than in other areas. This actually makes our work easier, because we can use the existing facilities of the WPCs, and their volunteers help us to implement our activities there. At the beginning we faced some resistance. It was hard to convince the host communities in Palestinian refugee camps that Syrian refugees did not come to take their share and that they could peacefully coexist. It was a time-consuming process, but eventually we managed to do that.

Do you actually provide the same services to Syrian and Jordanian women, and do you work in Syrian refugee camps?

Of course. We don't categorise women. We provide the same services for all, but we take the particularity of refugee women into consideration. There are

³ You can read the resolution in the following link: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1325\(2000\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1325(2000))

⁴ WPCs were established by UNRWA during the 1970s and 1980s to specifically provide services to women in the camps.

decisions that need to be taken and interventions that need to be done promptly. We can say that there is some kind of prioritisation for refugees. As for the Syrian refugee camps: no, we don't have offices there. But we conduct regular visits to these camps and participate in fund raising and winterisation campaigns.

UN agencies are the main service providers for Syrian refugees. Do you cooperate with them in implementing your programmes?

UNICEF supported us for the first three years of our work with Syrian refugees, and we might receive support from other UN agencies in the future. However, JWU is a sustainable organisation that continues its work whether or not it receives funding from the UN. The three years of support we received from UNICEF has now ended yet the project continues. Our clinics continue to provide free health services for Syrian women and their families regardless of whether we are funded or not. Even for urgent individual psychological interventions, which might be very expensive, we cover the costs if needed.

Can you speak about the major problems and challenges you face when working with Syrian refugees?

The two main problems are economic and health-related. Syrian families left their homes, belongings and income-generating activities behind when they fled the war and killing, sometimes arriving here only with the clothes on their backs. We started collecting donations for clothes, placing refugees with host families, or renting houses for them. These houses usually included more than one refugee family. We also focused on Syrian women economically. Since they are not integrated into Jordanian society and culture, we started vocational training programmes for women to practice income-generating activities from their homes. These activities include trainings on making natural soap, jam, beautification, embroidery, etc. In order to encourage their attendance we covered their transportation costs to the training centre.

As for health issues, an influx of refugees brings with it diseases, emergency cases, injuries, trauma, etc. In such cases, a fast intervention plan is required. This was a challenge for our medical staff, which sometimes worked 24 hours a day to conduct follow-up visits at home and to provide medication. Another challenge was the complicated registration procedures of the Jordanian government. It was very stressful for our legal aid unit to follow up on the registration procedures, especially given the scale of the initial influx.

Another challenge was mixing boys and girls in our activities. Syrian refugees come from very conservative backgrounds, and they often refuse to allow boys and girls to mix freely. We had difficulty working with children and families at the beginning, but now the situation is better in this regard. Child labour was one of the most challenging issues. A lot of the Syrian children who participated in

our activities were schools dropouts who worked in order to support their poor families. It is hard to convince very poor families that their children should go to school and that it is not their responsibility to work and support the family. We faced a lot of resistance from the families. We even started going to employers and telling them that it is illegal to employ children and we will hold them responsible if they continue using children as labourers.

Early marriage is another big problem. When we ask Syrian women at which age they got married, they would answer at 13 or 14. Many Syrians believe that if a girl is not married at 16 or 17 then it is a disaster for the family. We work intensively on this issue and have achieved some results, but it is still a big challenge. The crisis complicated this problem even more because of the lack of safety and stability. It increased fears regarding economic challenges and harassment, and many refugee families believe that their daughters will be safer if they are married.

Early marriage is severely restricted in Jordan. How do refugees circumvent such legal prohibitions?

Of course, not all marriage contracts are legally registered. There are cases where the marriage is documented solely on a piece of paper between the girl's family and the husband. Jordanian law identifies the age of marriage at 18, whereas in Syria and Iraq it is 14 or 15. A Sharia judge is allowed to approve early marriage in exceptional cases, for example if the girl is orphaned or raped and over 15 years of age. Unfortunately, the exception has, in some places, become the rule. If the girl is under 15, then the marriage will not be officially registered. If the girl is between 15 and 18, however, the Sharia judge will generally use the exception.

What about relations between Jordanian and Syrian women? Do you feel they are based on competition or on solidarity, and does hate speech have an effect on that?

To be honest, in our five years of working with Syrian refugees we haven't sensed any kind of competition between Jordanian and Syrian women. Jordanian families opened their houses to Syrian refugees and shared their resources with them. We know hate speech is out there and you can see it rather clearly sometimes, but there is political will in the country to fight and eliminate it. Sometimes, a poor Jordanian family might come and say 'why did you give food to Syrians and not to us?' This is normal. If you go to an area and distribute food to some poor people, other poor people will come later and say, 'why didn't you give food to me?' These are individual cases, and they don't necessarily represent a general feeling. Being all Arabs, we have similarities, but we are also able to distinguish each other. At the beginning of the crisis we were able to identify Syrian women walking on the street or Syrian children playing outside. Now, everybody looks the same. We cannot distinguish anymore. All Jordanians and Syrians are living in the same conditions and are facing the same challenges. The differences have melted away.

This is not the first time Jordan has faced an influx of refugees. Jordan has witnessed Palestinian refugees, Lebanese refugees during the Lebanese civil war and Iraqi refugees since 2003. Hostility and hate speech always exist, but in all cases people were able to adapt and coexist with the other. You hear things in the media or on the street, but at the end of the day these are all individual cases. We take our feedback from the people we work and deal with, whether they are Jordanians or Syrians, and we don't see or even sense such hostility on the grassroots level.

What is your assessment regarding SGBV among Syrian women and girls, and how many cases have JWU registered?

JWU has its shelter programme, and we take in any woman living in Jordan regardless of her citizenship, religion, race, culture or age. The only criterion is that she has to be above 18 years old. This means that this service was provided to Syrian women as well as to any other woman. Two types of Syrian women come to the shelter: the first consists of those who lost their family, don't have anyone to provide for them, or have nowhere else to go. The second type of woman has suffered from SGBV or domestic violence. We have yet to receive cases of sexual violence in which women were exploited for sex or raped. We have, however, received cases of women who were forced to work in nightclubs or were used for begging, which we identify as a type of trafficking. We cannot provide the exact number of cases, but we have more than 500 registered cases over the past five years.

What about cases of rape and/or harassment?

Such cases are not our speciality. They fall under the purview of the Family Protection Unit and the Public Security Directorate (the police), which maintain their own shelters for such cases. Even if we receive such cases, we directly refer them to the Family Protection Unit and they can proceed with them according to the law.

When it comes to working with Syrian women on topics related to gender, what is your perspective on the future? What approaches do you think are needed to work more efficiently with women in general and Syrian women specifically?

Change should come on two levels. First, we must change the preconceptions of the society at large, and this is a necessity. You cannot come to a society and impose new concepts on it – people will not process them. There should be long-term actions and plans in order to change stereotypes about women and to prevent the injustices done to them. This should be represented in everything we do: when working with children, schools, universities, governmental institutions and NGOs. We can call it a revolutionary change – a real change brought about by working with the entirety of society.

Second, we are convinced that targeting men *and* women with our campaigns, programmes, projects, direct communications and advocacy is the only way to move forward on gender-related topics. We have worked on thousands of cases of families facing domestic problems or GBV. In each of these we don't only work with the victim/survivor. We work with the entire circle: the family, the neighbours and anyone related to the problem through open counselling and coaching sessions. Our staff, especially our social workers and legal counsellors, are trained to deal with all members of the family. We have achieved big successes on both the individual and group levels. For example, if a woman has suffered from GBV or domestic violence and accepts this situation as her reality, we go to the male and work with him. We focus on coaching people on how to discuss rather than abuse, then we move to group sessions and work with all members of the family.

Challenging stereotypes and injustice toward women should happen on the level of the community at large, but it must also take place on the level of the family. In some cases, such as when betrothed couples face problems or challenges before marriage, we conduct sessions to help eliminate any potential for future complications. We have many success stories in working individually with men or women, as well as with families in general. Being able to convince men to come and attend sessions is a huge success by itself. There was a time where this was a taboo and an invasion to the male domain, but by now this has changed. We see men as partners in solving the problems.

It is not easy to speak with Syrian professionals in the field because of the precarious legal status many face when it comes to employment. Many organisations active in the field do, however, have Syrian volunteers. These men and women are usually paid a small compensation for their efforts, and JWU is no exception to this. One of their volunteers gave us a brief insight into her biography and her motivation to work with JWU.

I came to Jordan before the crisis – ten years ago. When the crisis began I couldn't go back to Syria to visit anymore, so I haven't been there in five years. I came to JWU three years ago, and before that I was a volunteer with the Jordanian Churches Association. I first encountered JWU as a patient in one of their clinics, and then I started telling other Syrian women about JWU and the services they provide. After that, I volunteered to work in the clinic for a year, helping to provide medication to people who couldn't afford it. We collected prescriptions, and then went to doctors and institutions willing to donate the required medicines. Later on, I learned about the projects targeting Syrians and volunteered to help in these projects. I have been doing this for the past three years.

I was also a volunteer with Save the Children Jordan. There I worked on an educational project regarding breastfeeding and reproductive health. However, when we started implementing activities in Syrian refugee camps I encountered

problems in getting security clearance to enter the camp. Being a Syrian living in the host community, it is not easy to volunteer inside Syrian refugee camps. Accordingly, I now work through CBOs and charity organisations.

I first came to Jordan because I got married. My husband was working here before the crisis, and I joined him before I finished high school. Since I got married young, I didn't finish my education. However my father, who died in Syria eight months ago, used to be a professor of the Arabic language at Homs University. Since then I have been trying to finish my high school degree, but being away from my family and worried about their safety has not allowed me to concentrate on my courses. Now, my main focus is to finish my high school degree and then go to university to continue my education.

'Humanity is the salvation' - A Syrian Intellectual in Exile

Interview with Wael Qaddour, 13.8.2015

'Humanity is the salvation' - A Syrian Intellectual in Exile

Interview with Wael Qaddour, 13.8.2015

Wael Qaddour is a Syrian playwright and director. He graduated from the Syrian Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in 2005 with a BA degree in theatrical arts. He has written and directed many plays for the theatre and worked in investigative journalism in the field of social inquiries. He also worked as a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialist for interactive theatre and art projects at the Syria Trust for Development until he left Syria in 2011. Qaddour now lives in Amman, Jordan, where he continues to work in the fields of play writing, directing and advertisement.

What was your experience in Syria during the crisis and when you came to Jordan, and why have you chosen Jordan?

I was in Damascus when the crisis started, but I didn't stay long in Syria afterwards – only around eight months. At the time I was newly married and the fields in which I worked were starting to close, meaning that true journalism ceased to exist in Syria in 2011. The Syrian Trust for Development is a different story because it is still functioning up to now. Our situation as staff was awkward: we were working in an organisation supported by the presidential palace – the Trust is headed by Asma'a al-Asad, the wife of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad – and the situation was escalating rapidly. It was clear that there was suppression in the suburbs of Damascus and later urban Damascus; everybody knew that. There was a peaceful movement that was being repressed. When some of my colleagues and I learned that the Trust had adopted the official opinion of the Syrian regime, each of us quit working for the organisation in a different way. Some resigned directly, while others refused to renew their work contracts once they expired. I belonged to the second group.

What made our situation more urgent was that I was wanted for the mandatory army service, which I refused to do knowing that the regime uses the army to suppress people. The Syrian army was deeply involved in that. Jordan was one of three choices, the other two being Lebanon and Egypt. Lebanon wasn't a preferred choice for us, so it came down to Jordan and Egypt. We chose Jordan because my wife's family had been living in Amman for 17 years at that time; they received and supported us upon our arrival.

If your wife's family had not been living in Jordan, would you still have chosen it?

No, I would have gone to Egypt. I was a participant in a workshop about cultural management in Egypt organised by a big cultural organisation there, and they offered me a good job opportunity. But since my wife's family was in Jordan she preferred to come here. In addition to that, the borders between Jordan and Syria were open and the travel for Syrians was easy at that time, so we decided to come to Jordan. It was a risk coming to a country I don't know; I just visited Jordan for very short periods before the Syria crisis. Of course, after the Jordanian government began to enforce travel restrictions for Syrians in June 2014,¹ things became harder for us.

Did you find opportunities in Jordan?

I consider myself one of the lucky ones. My previous professional experience and my early arrival into Jordan allowed me to work with many institutions as a drama coach and theatrical director during 2012, 2013 and 2014. I was also able to direct small performances and provide training in the fields of creative writing, editing and copy writing. It was relatively easy for me to find work. Living with my wife's family in the first few months also helped make our life easier. Compared to others with no experience – fresh graduates, undergraduates – or those who came later, my life was much easier. They are the ones who are suffering. Most of them have left Jordan or plan on leaving because the living conditions here are hard. Jordan is an expensive country. Even in Syria, where there is war now, the living cost is much lower compared to Jordan. So those who can't work can't live here.

Do you see yourself as a refugee, and do others see you as a refugee or as an artist?

My wife and I refuse to be framed as refugees. The image of the refugee does not represent us and is not in our best interest. The answer is certainly more complicated than that, but this is the easiest way to put it. We registered with UNHCR recently, three years after our arrival to Jordan, but we only did this to get a certain type of legal status and legal protection.

Regarding how people see me: I met most of the people I know through joint projects and work. In this domain I focus on work or common concerns, and that prevents the relationship from being limited by the refugee frame, which limits interaction and helps reproduce persecution. By that I mean that the desire of the host community to place someone within a certain frame eventually serves as a

¹ In June 2014, the Government of Jordan implemented restrictions on the travel of Syrians: only Syrians with official residencies in other countries (such as Europe, USA or the Gulf States) and those who are not registered as refugees are now allowed to come to Jordan and leave freely.

form of persecution. For me to adopt such a frame would be self-defeating, as it would minimise my options.

My wife and I chose to pursue multiple options when it comes to friendships and work. I chose to work and my wife chose to finish her Master's degree in English literature in Jordan. She graduated recently. Our actions were based on our choice to be activists outside Syria in as many spheres as possible. I can't say that we weren't empowered: we are not very young, we had some savings that helped us, and we have people supporting us. We were able to choose not to be put in this box. Unfortunately, most Syrians were not, which has created different types of persecution against them including hate speech.

So, your opinion is that the society looks at you in the frame you put yourself in, meaning that there are no prejudgements and stereotypes. Is your point that refugees are responsible for how people look at them?

Let me rearrange my idea. The discourse of the host community – whether it is Lebanese, Jordanian or Egyptian, and regardless of the political, economic, social, religious or ethnic situation – is necessarily violent. It is violent because the easiest way for a community to perceive you is to put you in a frame or a box. This makes it easier to deal with the 'other'. Our personal choice was not to be put in this box, but still there were silly and stupid situations with taxi drivers or shopkeepers where they tried to put us in this frame. Such moments might be perceived as offensive, if you want to see it that way. But being aware of the context of the two cultures allows you to see the broader picture and not to take such situations personally.

This approach increases your productivity within society. Anything healthy or positive I do in this society is not driven by a gesture of generosity, but is governed by basic human values. Trying to keep this in mind has allowed for us to escape the harm that comes from being perceived as a refugee in a host country.

This is your view as an intellectual. What do you think about the simple person who doesn't have the luxury of choice, who is governed by his/her surrounding and common way of thinking?

My above answer was regarding my personal choices. As part of my work, I have participated in a lot of projects and activities that bring together Jordanian and Syrian children and youth. Most have involved story-telling performances, radio stories, arts and writing. The objective wasn't to directly integrate them; it was a process of meeting and discussing their common problems and concerns. Such activities were part of well-designed projects and they worked. But out in daily life the ordinary person, on both sides, will adopt the use of hate speech. There are hundreds of examples, and it has created a kind of vengeful search for dignity among the Syrians in Jordan. Syrians regard themselves as superior.

They come from a country that was self-sufficient, a country that is cheap to live in, and that has a strong political and economic status in the region. This is how the Syrian regime and Syrians perceived Syria before 2011. Overnight, they found themselves living in tents or in small suburban apartments, with people feeling pity for them, and pity here is a sort of aggression, in addition to the direct aggression practiced against them. They found themselves in a situation that made them feel they have to be defensive, and suddenly all the stereotypes came to the surface.

You describe yourself as an intellectual. In your opinion, what are the problems and challenges facing the non-intellectual Syrian refugee in Jordan?

There are the legal problems of course, especially the limitations on work. Jordan's Ministry of Labour doesn't give work permits for Syrian refugees – unlike other people residing in Jordan, such as Egyptians and workers from Eastern Asia, who are permitted to work. It is clear that this is a political decision. Syrian investors are excluded of course because of their status. They have established factories and businesses in the country, so they are allowed to have a quota of foreign workers, including fellow Syrians. From my observations over the past four years, it is clear that Syrians work low wages and in bad working conditions because they don't have work permits. This has led to worsening living conditions and to deteriorating health and educational situations.

This has also prompted the formation of closed communities for Syrians who feel oppressed, which only serve to isolate them even more from Jordanian communities. They see that they are outside of the legalised workforce and are being prosecuted by the Ministry of Labour, in addition to the big limitations on their freedom of movement. Many have tried to go to Turkey, which they consider a better temporary alternative than Jordan and Lebanon. In general, the main challenges Syrian refugees face in Jordan relate to legal status, education, and health services. This goes for middle class Syrians as well. Even Syrians who came to Jordan in the eighties² are now being treated as refugees, and they feel frustrated by that.

Putting aside studies, official reports and stereotypes: how do you see the statement that “Syrian refugees are a burden on Jordan”?

I find the idea that “Syrians are a burden” hard to believe. From my daily observations, businesses are growing and companies are recruiting more and

² Most of this group came to Jordan after the events of Hama in 1982, when the Syrian regime besieged and bombed the city that was the stronghold of the Islamic Brotherhood, and killed at least 10,000 people of the city's population. As a result, thousands fled to Jordan and have been living in the country since then without facing any of the challenges that Syrian refugees face today. In addition, there are Syrians residing in Jordan before the crisis for economic reasons. The Jordanian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation estimates that 750,000 Syrians were living in Jordan before the start of the Syria crisis.

more every day. I can't say that I have a clear answer your question, but I will speak from Jordan's cultural policy point of view as I know it very well. As a person working in the cultural industry in Jordan, I can say that it is the least affected sector. It has actually benefited from Syrian artists coming to Jordan, although the majority of Syrian artists went to Lebanon, Egypt or Turkey. The few who came have actively participated in this industry, but most of them have left Jordan by this point. The style of Jordanian cultural policy is binary. There is the classical old model, where the state designs and supports cultural production, and there is the new model, where culture is a sponsored industry and this increases the quality of the cultural product. Since the cultural identity of Jordan is very similar to the Syrian cultural identity, in the sense of being an Arab-Islamic identity, there have been opportunities for Syrian artists to work here. But the support for Jordanian artists is very limited in the first place, so there are no prospects for Syrian artists living here. What I want to say is that Syrian artists and intellectuals who came to Jordan didn't constitute any burden.

Speaking about myself, my experience is limited in comparison to other Syrian artists, and a lot of opportunities were opened to me through projects and networking. I also haven't worked under any state-supported cultural projects, which are small, directed, and only benefit Jordanian artists. As for the map of foreign or Jordanian cultural funding: it is well-structured, and as long as I am able to be part of it and create partnerships then my livelihood is secure. According to everybody I met, Syrians and Jordanians, the Jordanian cultural sector can easily accommodate all the Syrian artists and intellectuals who came to Jordan due to growing demand. To be frank, I am one of those who benefited from this situation.

You mentioned that, as an artist, you work with regional and/or international supporters. Does this come from a feeling of weak connections with Jordanian artists?

Individual artists don't start their own businesses in Jordan, so they are necessarily part of working projects or institutions, be they governmental or non-governmental. All those artists worked with their Syrian counterparts, and this helped creating a lively scene. All accepted being part of other projects since they cannot start their own cultural project. There is no renouncing or constriction of Syrian artists, just nice partnerships developing on many levels.

You are certainly following the ongoing humanitarian interventions by UN agencies, NGOs and the Government of Jordan. How do you evaluate such interventions?

The Government of Jordan always approves charity or relief projects, meaning that anyone can start his/her own organisation and work on providing consumables such as food, clothes and medicine. Projects that don't exist until now are the

ones that include actual empowerment and skills building of refugees on all levels. Such projects like micro-financing and vocational training are not allowed. On the level of culture, there are projects but they are rarely sustainable. Most are ready-made strategies drafted by the donors without the participation of the beneficiary. Such projects are distant from the real needs; they all speak about integration but with no real impact. These projects aim at implementing proposals without a true value, it is all about humanitarian issues and aid without the actual development and/or the capacity building of refugees.

What do you wish for regarding the cultural, economic, political and intellectual roles that Syrians could or should play in Jordan?

I wish that Syrian intellectuals who remained in Jordan would stay, including myself. I wish that their situation will be reconsidered in order to facilitate their mobility and travel. This is very important for them to feel able to participate and to be part of a bigger picture. A lot of cultural projects that include Syrian intellectuals face difficulties because of the limitations on their travels and visits, so they can't design their projects properly. There are security fears in Jordan, especially with regard to ISIS, but when you speak about artists and intellectuals it should be a different story. The needs of this group are minimal: they need a legal status, integration into cultural projects, and free movement from and to Jordan. I wish that the Jordanian Ministry of Culture would be able to invest in Syrian artists and intellectuals, and do more projects with them within a professional frame.

These wishes can be generalised to the community of Syrian refugees more broadly. There is cruelty because some basic human rights are being confiscated, such as the right to work and the freedom of mobility. We all know that such rights are constitutionally guaranteed in Jordan. It is established that refugees are a vulnerable group, and treating this group cruelly will only bring negative results. When there is hate speech on both sides that is being adopted even by children, eventually the society at large will pay the price. The victimized will reproduce aggression against the community.

Imagine this in the long term. I wish for the establishment of a comprehensive, rights-based movement that consists of Jordanian and Syrian advocates working to legalise the existence of Syrians in Jordan. Such work should start on the grassroots level, and then transform into actual lobbying in order to produce a legal bill to be discussed in the parliament. Even if it failed, at least it would be a starting point. Syrians don't want to be resettled or become Jordanian citizens, but they should be given a status that allows them to make positive contributions to the society. I am speaking not only for the sake of Syrians but also Jordanians. Once the crisis is over most Syrians will go back home, but what they accomplished while here will remain.

Where do you see the future of Syria and why?

I can't read what's happening to be honest, but it seems dark. There are the escalating fights, a lot of complications and the fractures caused by sectarian violence, which is very hard to mend in the current circumstances. Sometimes I fear a Lebanon-like solution where sects agree to freeze the war without any kind of transitional justice for people, which will leave the society fractured and divided; states within states. Sometimes I fear a duplication of the Iraqi scenario, federalism and regions. The short-term political situation of Syria might be something in between the two, I really don't know. I am someone working in arts and culture, but I do have a sincere opinion on two points: first, it became evident that using religion in political speech is catastrophic on all levels; unfortunately, countries like Jordan are making the same mistake, and Egypt before them. This brings me to my second point, which is related to the concept of homeland. At this stage I am extremely skeptical about the concept of homeland. I believe that the policies of all governments in this region misused the concept; I now think that the concept of homeland itself is wrong, it should be put under the microscope and reconsidered. If any group is worse than the religious extremists, then it is the nationalist/patriotic extremists³, regardless of their political affiliations. Radicalising the concept of homeland and national identity, saying "*I am Syrian*," "*I am Lebanese*," "*I am Jordanian*" is an extension of the identity crisis. People don't know who politically represents them anymore; especially now that all current actors in the political arena are reproducing the authoritarian discourse that brought us to where we are today. I believe that the only salvation for people living in this region is to re-question the concept of homeland and its credibility because it is only leading to more extremism among all those involved.

Do you think the origin to this problem lies in the Sykes-Picot Agreement⁴?

Absolutely. In the years between the Sykes-Picot Agreement and now, Arab governments were unable to develop a truly citizenship-based discourse. For example, in pre-revolutionary Syria the value of an individual was governed only by his or her money or sect. There is no political life in Syria, just wealth, religion, sect and social class. The word "*I am Syrian*" means nothing now, and it should mean nothing. Being fanatic about national identities lead to conflicts and clashes because people haven't experienced the concepts of true citizenship. So when you see people saying "*I am a proud citizen*" and you look at their daily life, you will easily discover that they don't have equal opportunities. Where is the concept of citizenship in this case? We are just reproducing the ancient tribal norms, and

³ The original Arabic term 'watani' ('nationalist'/'patriotic') used here has a much less negative ring among most political currents in the Arab region, and indicates a meaning closer to the English term 'patriotic' than to 'nationalist'. However, Qaddour criticizes both usages of the term.

⁴ The so-called 'Sykes-Picot Agreement' (1916) was a secret agreement between the governments of the United Kingdom and France that defined their proposed spheres of influence and control in the Middle East after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire.

religious discourse is being used to enhance such division. Today, I don't represent myself as Syrian. I try to focus more on the common factor – the human factor – because our salvation lies there. Regimes and governments will never adopt such a thing. The hope lies with those initiators working on the ground, those who should forsake all these prejudgments and obsolete concepts about national identities and citizenship. No one has the right to tell who is patriotic and who is not.

‘There is no comparison’ - Palestinian refugees and the role of UNRWA in the Syrian refugee crisis

**Interview with Matar Saqer, former UNRWA
spokesperson, 13.8.2015**

‘There is no comparison’ - Palestinian refugees and the role of UNRWA in the Syrian refugee crisis

Interview with Matar Saqer, former UNRWA spokesperson, 13.8.2015

Matar Saqer was the spokesperson of the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) in Jordan from 1985 to 2011. As such, Saqer followed the influx of different refugee populations, including Syrians, into Jordan from the perspective of the agency specifically responsible for catering to Palestinian refugees. Palestinians comprise the largest refugee group in Jordan and, as such, they possess a unique place in the country's history and politics.

Please tell us a little bit about your personal and professional relations to refugees in Jordan.

I am a refugee myself. I am a Palestinian refugee, born in a refugee camp. I was born in a tent and lived through all the stages of refugee life. When I turned six years old, as the eldest son I had to queue for food handouts from UNRWA. I also started to go to UNRWA schools and clinics. Then the tents were gradually replaced by UNRWA with brick rooms and asbestos roofs, until the refugee camps in Jordan became what they are today: suburbs and urban quarters connected and linked to nearby cities.

So when you talk about refugees, I am saddled and bridled by UNRWA. This was the case even before I was born: during the time of conception, my mother visited an UNRWA clinic. So I consider myself and UNRWA as twins – we were born together in a way. UNRWA was established by the United Nations in 1949, and started operations in 1950. Being a refugee of course was a special experience. To be referred to as refugees, as people who do not belong, shaped my thinking and that of my generation. Even today, when you think that this Jordanian-Palestinian tension should be gone, it sometimes comes to the surface. The other day, I heard someone, a 22- or 23-year-old boy shouting at a neighbour: “you (blank) refugee; you better return to your home in Palestine.” We have been here for over 60 years, and there are still these voices. Who taught that boy to differentiate, and to consider me or this other person as not belonging? That sense of not belonging has always been part of the definition of a refugee.

Professionally speaking, I was spokesperson for UNRWA for 26 years. I retired in 2011, but I still work for UNRWA as a consultant so I am on top of developments. So in a way I still wear the UNRWA hat, not only because I work as a consultant but also because my heart is there. It is a lifelong principle and a mission for me. While I was spokesperson, I never said something for the sake of propaganda, or for the sake of embellishing the agency. No, I said it out of my heart and out of conviction.

How do you relate to the Syrian refugee crisis? What do you think are its main effects in Jordan, particularly when you think about Palestinian refugees?

I studied English literature in Damascus, Syria, so I am aware of the dynamics of the Syrian community. I also used to visit Yarmouk camp¹ in Syria to see friends and university colleagues living there. In 1970, when there was unrest in Jordan, many Palestinian refugees took refuge in Syria for a few weeks and then returned.

Now we face a very different situation. My professional relationship with the Syrian crisis started a few years ago. The crisis was only starting when I retired in 2011, but I continued to follow the news. The Syrian crisis in Jordan increased the burden on an already burdened government. The number of Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in the country is currently about 2.2 million. This does not include the displaced persons,² and now there is also a large number of Syrian refugees.

When the Syrian influx into Jordan gradually rose to an alarming number of people crossing on a daily basis, the government decided to set up Za'atari camp for them. But many refugees also found their way into the cities and ended up living in squatter areas, low-income areas, Palestinian refugee camps, and other suburbs in Amman and other Jordanian cities. This increased the burden on the already burdened communities. First of all, what was immediately felt were the rental prices, which went up significantly. There was a hike in rental prices in Baqa'a camp, for example, but also in Jabal Al-Nuzha, which is not a

¹ Yarmouk camp is unofficial refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus. It was home to the largest Palestinian refugee community in Syria until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

² Palestinian refugees are those who were born in Palestine or whose normal place of residence was Palestine for at least two years before 1948, and who lost both their home and their means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 events, as well as their descendants. UNRWA services are available to all those who live within its area of operations, are registered with the agency, and are in need of assistance. In Jordan, UNRWA established four camps after 1948: Zarqa camp, Jabal Hussein, Irbid camp, and Wihdat (Amman New Camp). Another influx from the West Bank into the Jordanian East Bank came during the Arab-Israeli war and the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, and six more camps were established both for Palestinian refugees and displaced persons. By that time, the West Bank had become a part of Jordan. Many of those who came to the East Bank were already Palestinian refugees living in the West Bank in refugee camps. Those who were already registered with UNRWA continued to be referred to as refugees (sometimes also as 'second time' refugees, or displaced refugees). Yet there were also many indigenous inhabitants of the West Bank in this wave. These original West Bankers are considered displaced persons, given that they left one part of the country to another part of the same country. Since the 1990s, many registered refugees stopped registering their newborns with UNRWA, so that not all descendants of registered refugees are counted as registered refugees in the above definition.

camp. Basically, the influx affected all poor and low-income areas in the country. It became very difficult to find a free shelter,³ and if you did then it could be twice the price it used to be. It became a burden for both the refugees and the local people who were looking for places to live.

The effect of the Syrian influx can also be seen with regard to jobs. Syrians largely work in seasonal jobs or as casual labour, meaning that in winter they sometimes work in agriculture in the Jordan Valley, when it is the time for olive picking. In summer, they work in the construction business. Many of them work as assistants, as simple labourers. I am talking about the majority; I am not talking about the professionals. I have not seen Syrian refugees working here as professionals, such as engineers. Many are shop assistants. If you now go to any place, especially restaurants, many have Syrian workers. Indeed, many restaurants that are famous in Damascus have now opened in Amman.

How is this additional influx received in your experience?

My general experience is that newcomers are not always welcomed. A good example for this would be the crisis that erupted after the occupation of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990. There were many Palestinians among the people who came back to Jordan, around 300,000 people or 10% of the population at the time. This was a strain on the infrastructure and on the job market. The economy was suffering from stagnation and recession at the time following the economic boom during the mid-1970s. This influx was an additional burden on the government and the working people. When the returnees came from Kuwait, the Palestinian refugees in Jordan were not very welcoming. We used to advertise vacancies in UNRWA, and the Palestinian refugees from Kuwait spoke excellent English and were much more qualified for office work than their Palestinian brethren in the country. Many of the latter came and said: "Look guys, we should have a quota. Our right has to be preserved regarding the recruitment from among the Palestinian refugees in Jordan. They have been enjoying good salaries in Kuwait, and now they are coming back." To share with them the same resources, the same number of jobs and infrastructure, was not an easy thing.

It is the same with the Syrian refugees. Many of them have ended up living in Palestinian refugee camps, and that means that UNRWA has had to accept their children in UNRWA schools – not only the children of Palestinian refugee families, but in many cases UNRWA has had to accept Syrian children. There are no schools in these camps other than those of UNRWA. So by default, UNRWA has had to accept the children of the families who live in refugee camps and who have official residence status there.

³ UNRWA calls the housing units it deals with shelters (rather than apartments) because they are often made of very simple materials, especially in the refugee camps.

Is accepting anyone who lives in UNRWA camps to UNRWA schools no matter their origin an established practice, i.e. something that existed before the Syrian influx?

Indeed. Approximately 120,000 boys and girls study at the 170 UNRWA schools in Jordan. UNRWA provides ten years of schooling. Inside refugee camps, UNRWA has to accept the children of Palestinian refugees, of displaced persons, and of any other family living there. Outside the camps, it depends on whether there is space or not. Of the 120,000 students at UNRWA schools, perhaps 100,000 are pure Palestinian refugees. Of the remainder, the majority are displaced Palestinians (DPs), the children of Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS).

Accepting Syrian children or PRS in UNRWA schools has been a burden. This is true not only in terms of the volume or size of work, but also in terms of special problems. For example, sometimes you have to make up for the lost schooling days or you have to make adjustments to the curriculum. But more important is introducing what is called "education in emergency programmes." Many of the children are traumatised, having seen their dear ones killed or their houses demolished, so you need such special programmes. UNRWA has been doing that not only in Jordan but also in Lebanon, where a large number of Palestinian refugees ended up, and in the Gaza Strip. Even the UNRWA schools in Syria, some of which still operate, now have introduced emergency aid, education in emergency programmes and psycho-social programmes. Education cannot wait. When a refugee issue arises, when an earthquake takes place, or a man-made crisis or a natural disaster occurs, people normally think of tents, food and medicine as the priorities. But UNRWA is saying: "look guys, education is as important. Equip children for the future."

How would you see the role of UNRWA, politically and in relation to its target population? How does it compare to that of UNHCR?

During my work with UNRWA I have never felt threatened in the communities in which we live. UNRWA is friends with the Palestinians. The UNRWA logo, the blue flag in itself, used to be considered as a mark of safety in refugee camps. UNRWA has always been living among refugees. I have not, in my life, heard of a security attack on UNRWA, or of a politically motivated attack. So UNRWA has always been considered as a friendly element. This is for good reason, as the role it has played in the life of refugees is unprecedented. You know, there is no organisation in the world like UNRWA, in that it has been associated with the same group of people for more than 60 years. There is a unique relationship between UNRWA and the refugees. It is a long journey based on mutual interest and mutual respect. People sometimes talk about a love-hate relationship when you mention UNRWA because it is a reminder of the Palestinian catastrophe, and

many refugees see UNRWA as an alternative to returning them to their home. Instead of sending them back to their homes or allowing them to return, the world has created an organisation to help them. The provision of assistance by UNRWA for all these 60+ years has become a symbol of the Palestinian refugees' rights. In fact, every time there was ambiguity in the region about political solutions – for example when the Oslo Accords were signed between the Palestinian Authority and Israel – people were looking to UNRWA to see what we were doing or not doing, so as to read the future.

UNRWA has always been living and working in a volatile environment. No organisation in the world has weathered political storms, crises and problems like UNRWA: the Suez war in 1956, in which Israel occupied the Gaza strip and the Egyptian Sinai; the war of 1967, when there was another influx of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza into Jordan; the war in South Lebanon in 1978; a second war there in 1982 when Israel occupied South Lebanon; the first *intifada*; the second *intifada*; and then the embargo and the wars in Gaza. These are only the most important of a series of events. UNRWA has weathered all these storms. And unlike other UN organisations or embassies that used to evacuate their international staff for their safety, the international staff of UNRWA stayed behind. So UNRWA was there to deal with the aftermath of every crisis that happened in the Middle East.

So how would you compare UNRWA and UNHCR, and the status of Palestinians vs. that of Syrian refugees?

To me, there is no comparison between UNHCR and UNRWA in that sense. UNHCR was established one year after UNRWA. It deals with refugees all over the world, with the exception of Palestinian refugees. When UNRWA was set up, the Palestinians were the only refugee group. Now, registered Palestinian refugees number about 5.1 million, compared to 13 million refugees of concern for UNHCR, as well as the many more internally displaced people that are increasingly falling under its purview. I have heard that there were attempts to amalgamate UNRWA with UNHCR when the latter was first set up, but the Arab governments opposed this.

The mandates of UNHCR and UNRWA also differ. The three traditional solutions for refugees serviced by UNHCR are to be absorbed in the country of refuge, returned to their homes or transferred to a third country. UNRWA has a special mandate, which is to provide assistance to Palestinian refugees until we reach a settlement of their issues. A Palestinian refugee has the right to return. The UN General Assembly issued resolution 194 in 1948, which says that the Palestinian refugees should be allowed to return to their homes at the earliest practicable date, and that those who opt not to return to the properties they lost or left behind in Palestine should be compensated. So you cannot put a Palestinian refugee on equal footing with other refugees in the world.

Now there is a war in Syria between different Syrian factions, or between the opposition and the regime, with some intervention from here and there. I think sooner or later the Syrian crisis will come to an end. It is not an issue between occupier and occupied. In Palestine, the refugees were expelled. When the Syrians left now and came to Jordan, they knew that their country is called Syria. It is an Arab country, and their return is guaranteed once this comes to an end and there is a settlement, and once there is reconciliation. What prevents them from going back once the war comes to an end? They can go back! In comparison, the hopes of the Palestinian refugees to return to their country are more a theory than a practical option. The horizon is pretty dim for resolving the Palestinian crisis. The solution that the Palestinians dream about – the return – does not seem possible in the foreseeable future.

So in my view these are the main differences between Syrian and Palestinian refugees. They are very large. Palestinian refugees have been living as refugees for 67 years. There are Syrian refugees now, but it is a matter of time and all will return. Even if they opt not to return and manage to live elsewhere by choice, they know they have a country called Syria and they will not be called refugees. Maybe I sound naive, but this is a major difference.

UNRWA is responsible for Palestinians coming from Syria (and other countries) to its areas of operation. What have your experiences been in this regard? There are rumours about Palestinians coming from Syria with forged Syrian documents, who then register with UNHCR as Syrians, and simultaneously with UNRWA as Palestinians. Can you confirm this?

I would not be surprised if this was the case. Many of those holding Palestinian travel documents as refugees would throw them away out of fear that the Jordanian government would send them back or not accept them. You know, Jordan has always been saying that “we have had our share of refugees - Jordan is not a dump site for every refugee crisis.” There was an influx of Palestinians from Iraq after 2003, for example. Ruwayshed camp (at the Iraqi border) and others were set up, and Jordan denied them entry, saying “no way you are going to stay, because if we agree then all the Palestinian refugees will come to Jordan.” Jordan’s position on that is very adamant: no more Palestinian refugees in Jordan, so as to avoid shifting the demographic balance.

Some Palestinian refugees from Syria have been put into Cyber City camp – a camp specifically established for this group of people. Are there precedents for such a practice of separating refugees by origin?

Indeed, Cyber City is a camp specifically established for Palestinian refugees from Syria. To my knowledge, some UNRWA revenues are committed there, and

UNRWA is providing services, such as mobile health teams.⁴ There is a precedent for this: Ruwayshed camp, which I just mentioned, and which was established at the Jordanian-Iraqi border in 2003. After the toppling of Saddam Hussein, some Palestinian quarters in Baghdad were attacked in retaliation by the surrounding communities, and they were anxious about their security. Many came to Jordan and some went to Syria, where another camp was set up on the border between Syria and Iraq. So yes, Ruwayshed camp was mainly for Palestinians from Iraq who did not enjoy residency status in Jordan, while others were allowed to enter Jordan or transit through it. But eventually all of them were transferred to a third country.

I participated in the effort at Ruwayshed. We gave some cash assistance to those who were in immediate need, and helped the students who were at the universities and wanted our intervention on their behalf to be accepted in Jordan. I visited the families there, and did not find any non-Palestinians. It was administered by the Jordanian Red Crescent Society. About 380 individuals were granted entry on "compassionate grounds". Most of them were Jordanian women married to holders of Palestinian documents.

But UNRWA was not only active there. In 1995, the Palestinians were expelled from Libya, and they ended up stranded on the border between Egypt and Libya. UNRWA and UNHCR then established makeshift camps together, and UNRWA introduced education for refugees there. So there is a history of cooperation between UNHCR and UNRWA. Actually, this history started with the Kuwait crisis in 1990.⁵ UNRWA had a role in this crisis, even though it was not directly related to Palestinian refugees. There was an influx of many people immediately after the crisis – Sri Lankans, UN employees, many transients. Around one million people left for their countries through Jordan. So you had transit centres in different parts of Amman, e.g. in schools. And UNRWA would help, because we were the only UN organisation with vehicles and infrastructure, with a fleet, buildings, and clinics. There was no UNHCR office in Jordan at the time. UNRWA participated in providing first base reception for UN employees that were evacuated from Baghdad, and helped them with logistics to travel to their countries.

⁴ More information about Cyber City and PRS is available at: <http://www.unrwa.org/prs-jordan>.

⁵ The Kuwait crisis erupted when, after Jordan's tacit support for Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait in 1990, the Kuwaiti government expelled around 300,000 labour migrants. The great majority was of Palestinian origin and held Jordanian nationality.

Let us return to the situation today. The current big question for UNRWA is funding. Do you think the current funding shortage is related to the Syria crisis, because most of the funds are channelled into the Syria response, leaving UNRWA behind? Or is it a natural development that UNRWA would lose funds anyway, even if there were no Syria crisis?

UNRWA has always been suffering from chronic financial shortfalls and deficits. These deficits accumulate every year, but every six to eight years the problem reaches crisis levels. The difference between now and former crises is that the priorities have shifted. As long as the Arab-Israeli conflict was the main problem in the Middle East UNRWA's financial situation was much better. Now look around you. Where does the Arab-Israeli conflict, or the Palestinian cause stand among the crises in the region? You have the crisis in Iraq, the crisis in Yemen, the crisis in Syria, the crisis in Libya, you have the Ebola outbreak. In addition to this, and perhaps more important, you have the Greek economy and the danger it poses to other European economies. So there are seven or eight issues on the global agenda that overshadow the Palestinian crisis. The Arab-Israeli conflict used to be priority number one in the world, but now it is perhaps priority number seven. The same is the case with UNRWA.

When it comes to more internal reasons, UNRWA's cost of providing services increases year after year. This is because the refugee population increases year by year, as does the number of staff. The demand for UNRWA services has also risen. For many refugees in Gaza, for example, UNRWA is now the only source of livelihood due to the embargo, the closure of tunnels to Egypt, and the death of the once active economy.

UNRWA totally depends on voluntary contributions from governments. Its budget is not part of the UN budget because it is a subsidiary organ of the United Nations. UNRWA has not been able to find sources of funding other than the traditional ones. Ninety percent of its money comes from the United States, the European Union and its member states, plus Japan and some Arab countries. Saudi Arabia gives some contributions to the general fund, and there are also significant contributions from Kuwait and UAE. This is apart from the generous contributions from these and other Arab countries in the Gulf to special appeals. UNRWA has the regular budget, which it spends on the day-to-day activities: on the salaries of 30,000 staff members, of which the large part are teachers, who are Palestinian refugees themselves. The salaries and utilities take more than 75% of UNRWA's budget. For specific crises UNRWA has separate funds through appeals, e.g. the Gaza appeal that related to the destruction of more than 10,000 homes in the recent war, or the appeal for the reconstruction of Nahr El-Bared camp in Lebanon. So there are regular needs of UNRWA, and emergency needs. I have calculated that UNRWA needs at least \$1 billion every year. The regular budget stands at \$620 million, plus additional funding to meet the special crises that erupt over the course of a year.

So the Syrian crisis was not the main or only reason behind UNRWA's financial crisis. It is mainly due to chronic shortfalls, and the fact that the volume of contributions has not kept pace with the increase in the refugee population, the increase in their poverty, and in the increase in demand for UNRWA services. But many have come to the conclusion that this current funding crisis is deliberate, and that there are attempts by the anti-UNRWA parties in the world to gradually phase out the agency.

Do you believe that? Is there really an attempt to phase out UNRWA?

I do not believe in conspiracy theories. Not a single country from among UNRWA donors has reached the conclusion that UNRWA has exhausted the reasons for which it was established. All governments agree that UNRWA is still a stabilising factor in the region, and that is why governments continue to pay for UNRWA. For me, it is now more important than ever for governments in a region full of crises to contribute to UNRWA. But in my view the political importance of UNRWA has now deteriorated because of all the other issues I just recounted, which have overshadowed the Palestinian cause.

The other day Nasser Judeh, the Jordanian minister of foreign affairs, voiced absolute rejection of any reduction of UNRWA's services and warned about the consequences of not bridging UNRWA's current deficit. Jordan was concerned about UNRWA's announcement that it would not open its schools for the new academic year unless the budget deficit was closed. I understand that next week the commissioner general will either say 'ok, we are going to continue', or 'no, sorry, UNRWA cannot open its 700 schools in the region unless it is sure that it can meet the salaries of 22,000 teachers for one school year.' I think the commissioner general cannot do this unless UNRWA receives assurances of funding. Unless the \$100 million gap is closed, UNRWA cannot proceed.⁶

So the reasons for UNRWA's financial crisis obviously go way beyond the Syrian refugee crisis. The question remains: do you feel that in Jordan – in discussions within UNRWA and among Palestinian refugees – the threat of a funding shortage has led to a sense of competition between UNRWA and UNHCR, or between Palestinian and Syrian refugee assistance? Is there a feeling that the Syrian refugee crisis is threatening UNRWA's institutional survival?

I have not felt much of that. People are concerned about UNRWA's financial crisis in general; this is not new to them. As I said, UNRWA has become the only source of assistance for many poor families, and it has some 7,500 staff

⁶ By 18 August 2015 UNRWA, with the fund-raising support of the Jordanian Government and the Palestinian Authority, was able to secure around 80% of the needed funding to open schools on time. More details here: <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/unrwa%E2%80%99s-financial-crisis-relieved-schools-time>.

members in Jordan – in the Jordan field office and headquarters in Amman, including the teachers and health services staff. UNRWA is the largest importer of hard currency in Jordan, and it used to be the second largest employer for decades. By now it might be the third or fourth largest. So its continued presence in the country means a lot, apart from its role as a political symbol. To many, its existence assures the refugees that their issue is still in safe hands, and this is one reason why donor countries and host countries are interested in maintaining it.

Host governments, donors, and refugees all want UNRWA to remain. The UN has renewed UNRWA's mandate and will continue to do so. Given that these things are certain, I am not worried about the existence of UNRWA per se. I worry about the form UNRWA will take in the future. Are we talking about a healthy agency that is able to provide services, or one that has become an empty shell? UNRWA is now working on very narrow margins when it comes to budget lines. If you talk about the real needs of the refugees and compare them with what UNRWA gives them, there is a huge gap. Ok, not all of the refugees in Jordan need food hand-outs. UNRWA gives food assistance to 2.3% of the total number of refugees, whom it used to call 'special hardship cases'. Now the modern expression is the 'social safety net'. We are talking about some 15,000 people, however if the government poverty line is used then 30% of the refugee population would be counted as absolute poor. There is no fat left with UNRWA; the deficit now cuts into the bone of the agency. The onus now is on the donors to allay the anxiety of the refugees and the host governments, to dig deeper into their pockets and come up with more funds. I believe that the General Assembly, which established UNRWA, should also try to find something in its budget. The deficit can easily be bridged if there is the political will to do so. I view UNRWA as an element of stabilisation and peace in the region. If you allow UNRWA to collapse, the repercussions will be huge.

You mentioned past cooperation between UNRWA and UNHCR. If you think about the future of UNRWA, and of Palestinians as well as other refugees in Jordan, where do you see potential for working together on issues related to refugees, and what could be a way forward to deal with these funding shortages that of course do not only affect UNRWA but also UNHCR at the moment?

I do not see much hope for cooperation regarding funding. The reasons why governments pay UNRWA are totally different to the rationale for financing UNHCR or other UN agencies. But when it comes to certain small-scale projects, e.g. establishing a library in a school or a computer centre between UNRWA and UNESCO for example, this exists. UNRWA director of education is seconded by UNESCO. Even the signs at agency schools read 'UNRWA-UNESCO schools' until about 10 years ago. There is an agreement from 1953 between UNESCO,

UNRWA, and the host governments that UNRWA teaches the curriculum taught by the host governments. So in its schools in Jordan, UNRWA teaches the Jordanian curriculum. When it comes to the WHO, UNRWA health programmes are set according to the norms of the WHO. Regarding children, there is a huge cooperation with UNICEF, and with UNCHR as well. So yes, there is cooperation in various aspects, but when it comes to fundraising I do not think that collective cooperation is feasible. I believe UNRWA's funding needs to be identified as for a special purpose. But cooperation can work well at the local level and at the level of small-scale projects.



