

July 2013

# Factsheet Syria



## Syria's Refugee Crisis and its Implications

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Syrian refugees waiting to be registered with the local UNHCR office in Amman, Jordan, June 2013

As the Syrian civil war enters its third year, the human cost of the conflict is growing exponentially. According to the UN, as of July 2013 more than 100,000 Syrians are dead, more than 4.5 million are internally displaced, and more than 1.7 million are refugees in neighboring countries. By the end of 2013, more than half of Syria's population, over 10 million people, likely will need urgent humanitarian assistance.

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was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

**Syria**

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In response to this growing crisis and the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) staff members Tiffany Lynch and Sahar Chaudhry travelled to Jordan and Egypt in June 2013 as part of a UNHCR-led delegation that also included the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement. The purpose of the fact finding mission was to gather firsthand information about the Syrian refugee crisis, talk with refugees and representatives of aid organizations about internal displacement within Syria, and better understand the implications for minority religious communities and religious freedom in the country.

USCIRF staff interviewed 40 refugees in individual and group settings about why they fled Syria, current religious freedom and human rights conditions in Syria, and their experiences as refugees. Staff met with refugees at Za'atri refugee camp in Jordan; UNHCR registration centers in Jordan and Egypt; refugee assistance centers throughout Egypt and Jordan; and in refugees' private, rented homes in Jordan. The delegation also met with U.S. and Jordanian government officials, UN representatives, and representatives of national and international organizations assisting refugees to learn more about assistance needs and the impact the refugee crisis is having on host nations.

This factsheet provides an overview of key findings from the delegation's visit, followed by a breakdown of the refugee crisis by host nation that reflects information gathered during the trip as well as meetings and research conducted in Washington, D.C. through July 18, 2013.

For more information on religious freedom in Syria and USCIRF recommendations to the U.S. government on how it should respond to both religious freedom violations in that country and the regional refugee crisis, see USCIRF's April 2013 Special Report, [\*Protecting and Promoting Religious Freedom in Syria\*](#).

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Interviews with Syrian Refugees**

- Refugees with whom USCIRF spoke almost universally reported fleeing generalized violence such as aerial bombardments, fighting, and arrests in their neighborhoods, rather than targeted religious persecution. These individuals, who largely had lived in majority Sunni areas, reported that they had fled neighborhoods, towns and cities that government forces targeted because of their political opposition to the government or support for the Free Syrian Army. More than 90 percent of all refugees registered with UNHCR identify themselves as Sunni Muslim.
- Refugees USCIRF spoke with said they want to return to Syria once the fighting ends. Many have family who stayed behind in Syria to look after their property or periodically return there for short periods of time to check on the conditions of homes or businesses.

- Many refugees and representatives of aid organizations expect the sectarian nature of the conflict to intensify in the future, leading to additional attacks, destruction, and deaths. USCIRF staff heard refugees make a number of anti-al-Qaeda, anti-al-Nusra, and anti-Alawite statements, the latter due to the perception that Alawites are aligned with the Assad regime.

### **Religious Minorities**

- The percentage of religious minorities, such as Christians, Alawites, or Yezidis, who have registered as refugees with UNHCR, is disproportionately small compared to their percentage in the Syrian population. They constitute about only one percent respectively of all registered refugees. USCIRF staff attempted, but were unable, to meet with Syrian Christian refugees in Jordan and Egypt.
- In Jordan, USCIRF confirmed with UN representatives and organizations providing assistance in Syria that most religious minorities are believed to be taking shelter within Syria in areas where their co-religionists reside or in government-held areas. When they do flee Syria, the vast majority go to Lebanon and Turkey where there are similar religious communities.
- UNHCR told USCIRF that Christians and Alawites reportedly are not registering with their organization because they fear negative repercussions from Sunni refugees identifying them with the regime. They reportedly also fear that if Bashar Al-Assad remains in power and they return to Syria, the Syrian government will view them as disloyal for having sought safe haven in a neighboring country.
- Refugees are required to register with UNHCR to receive food assistance from World Food Programme, cash assistance from international assistance organizations, and special education and health assistance. Because religious minority communities and others who reside in rural areas and cannot travel to registration centers are not registering with UNHCR in large numbers, they do not receive the amount of assistance provided to refugees who have registered.
- USCIRF raised the concern that if religious minorities begin fleeing Syria en masse and seek shelter in refugee camps, they could be vulnerable to reprisal attacks based on sectarian lines. While recognizing this concern, UNHCR reported that it does not have the resources to develop a program that would protect religious minorities in refugee camps or other settings from reprisal attacks committed along sectarian lines. The Government of Turkey reportedly is building special refugee camps for Christians and ethnic Kurds because of these concerns.

### **Regional Refugee Catastrophe**

- As of July 17, UNHCR reports that more than 1.7 million Syrians are refugees in neighboring countries. UNHCR predicts that 3.5 million Syrians potentially could become refugees by the end of 2013. This large number is exerting significant pressure on neighboring countries' economies and stretching their already limited resources and services. Due to these pressures, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan either have closed their borders or limited daily refugee inflows.
- UNHCR projects that by the end of 2013 more than 75 percent of refugees will be living outside of UN camps. (70 percent of all refugees currently live outside of camps.) According to both refugees and refugee assistance organizations, rent is the primary assistance need for most refugees as the increased demand for housing is inflating rental prices and reducing housing availability. As such, Syrians are both sharing housing and living in sub-standard conditions including in vacant buildings and makeshift shelters. Additionally, local tensions have resulted from refugees and citizens having to share limited resources and stretched services, including water and education and health services.
- As countries and host communities reach saturation in their ability to absorb refugees, several protection issues are arising such as governments like Iraq closing borders, and refugees stranded in rural settings, which significantly limits their access to assistance. As borders close, Syrians seeking to flee will be stuck in Syria along exit points on the border with limited shelter or assistance and vulnerable to violence.
- UN officials in Jordan told USCIRF that they feared that the conflict in Syria will spill over into neighboring countries, as is currently the case in Lebanon. They expressed concern about the economic strains resulting from supporting hundreds of thousands of refugees and that increasing social tensions between refugees and host communities will lead to new or increased political instability. Already, according to UNHCR Jordan, there have been increasing demands by the Jordanian people and some governmental officials to close the Syrian-Jordanian border.

## **REFUGEE HOSTING COUNTRIES**

### **Egypt**

- UNHCR reported that as of July 18, there were more than 92,000 refugees in Egypt. Based on trends seen before the ouster of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, UNHCR expects that number to reach 200,000 by the end of the year. Both refugees and UNHCR told USCIRF staff that this increase is due to the relatively low cost of living in Egypt as opposed to other host nations, and at the time of the delegation's visit, the Egyptian government's welcoming the Syrian populations.

- Until the ouster of Morsi, the Government of Egypt (GoE) did not require Syrian refugees to obtain a visa to enter Egypt. Upon arrival, all Syrian refugees were required to register with UNHCR and the Ministry of Immigration where they could obtain a free-of-charge six-month renewable residency permit that allowed them to work legally in the country. However, as of July 8, 2013, Syrians must obtain a visa and pass a security clearance before being permitted to seek refuge in Egypt. As of the date of this publication, the September 2012 Morsi decree allowing all Syrian refugees to access public health and education services remains in effect. This assistance is not given to other refugee populations in the country. However, refugees reported to USCIRF that they have had trouble accessing these services because they are located far from areas where refugees currently are residing.
- There are no refugee camps in Egypt: all refugees live in private rented accommodations, often at inflated prices. Refugees live primarily in three areas: Cairo, Alexandria, and Damietta.
- A few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide assistance to Syrian refugees. These NGOs told USCIRF staff they are concerned that Egypt's existing restrictions on NGOs and the draft NGO law significantly impede their ability to provide assistance. These restrictions and the draft law limit an NGO's work if it is deemed to be political or advocates for specific rights. Additionally, Egypt has created a bureaucratic oversight structure and other barriers that limit NGOs' ability to receive and disseminate funds to refugees.
- At the time of the June visit, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi charities were providing assistance often exclusively to specific refugee areas and preferred groups with little coordination or assistance from more experienced refugee assistance organizations. It is unclear if such activities will be allowed to continue in Egypt.

### Jordan

- The UNHCR reports that as of July 18, Jordan hosts more than a half million Syrian refugees and is projected to host one million by the end of the year. UNHCR also reports that a small percentage of Syrian refugees return to Syria because the security situation has improved in their home areas, to check on family or property, or to fight in the civil war.
- USCIRF was told that while the Jordanian border remains open, the government is limiting how many refugees can cross daily. Refugee assistance organizations told USCIRF they are concerned that the Government of Jordan (GoJ) could close the border permanently, as it did in May for one week. USCIRF staff also was told that unaccompanied young men are prohibited from entering Jordan. The majority of Syrians entering Jordan do so at unofficial border crossings. Jordan does not require Syrians to obtain a visa or residency permit to enter. Once they are registered with UNHCR, they are sent to Za'atri refugee camp where they can then be "sponsored" or "bailed out" by a Jordanian citizen. Syrians who enter Jordan through an official border crossing do not have to go first to Za'atri and can, under strict conditions, legally work.

- Syrian refugees in Jordan live in both camp and non-camp settings, with 70 percent living in urban and rural areas. There are currently three operational refugee camps in Jordan: Za'atri camp, the Emirati Jordanian Camp, and Cyber City. UNHCR currently is constructing a fourth camp, Azraq, which will house an additional 130,000 refugees. USCIRF staff visited Za'atri camp, whose population of approximately 120,000 makes it Jordan's fourth largest city. As staff witnessed, its large size and lack of security personnel present a number of protection issues inside the camp for both refugees and assistance organizations.
- As is the case with other urban Syrian refugee populations in the region, access to affordable, adequate housing is the primary need. Refugee populations are straining limited water resources (Jordan is the fourth most water-insecure country in the world), and an average of 3.4 million liters of water is trucked into Za'atri camp daily. Health and education services also are overwhelmed, particularly in the northern governorates that are hosting most of the refugees. These strains have put enormous pressure on the GoJ to close the border. USCIRF staff was told repeatedly that the new Jordanian parliament has called on the government to restrict access to the country, and results from a University of Jordan poll show that 70 percent of Jordanians support closing the border.

### Iraq

- UNHCR reports that as of July 18, more than 161,000 Syrian refugees are registered or awaiting registration in Iraq, with 95 percent in the Kurdistan region.
- The border with Iraq is closed. The al-Qaim border closed in October 2012 and on May 19, 2013 the government closed the Peshkapor border crossing. According to UNHCR, prior to its closing, 95 percent of arrivals, upwards of 300-400 people per day, used the Peshkapor border crossing.
- Refugees in Iraq are living in both camp and non-camp settings. The Kurdistan region hosts three camps -- Domiz Camp, al-Qaim Camp 1 and al-Qaim Camp 2 -- and the Kurdistan Regional Government is building two additional camps, Darashakran Camp and Sulaymaniyah Camp.
- In late spring and early summer, thousands of refugees returned to Syria due to frustration over living conditions and lack of freedom of movement and access to employment. Syrians also returned because of a perceived improvement in the security situation.

### Lebanon

- As of July 18, UNHCR reports that Lebanon hosts more than 615,000 Syrian refugees and projects that by the end of the year this number will increase to more than 1.2 million -- at least 25 percent of all persons living in the country. These Syrian refugees are in addition to an

estimated 500,000 Syrian migrant workers who resided in Lebanon prior to the start of the conflict.

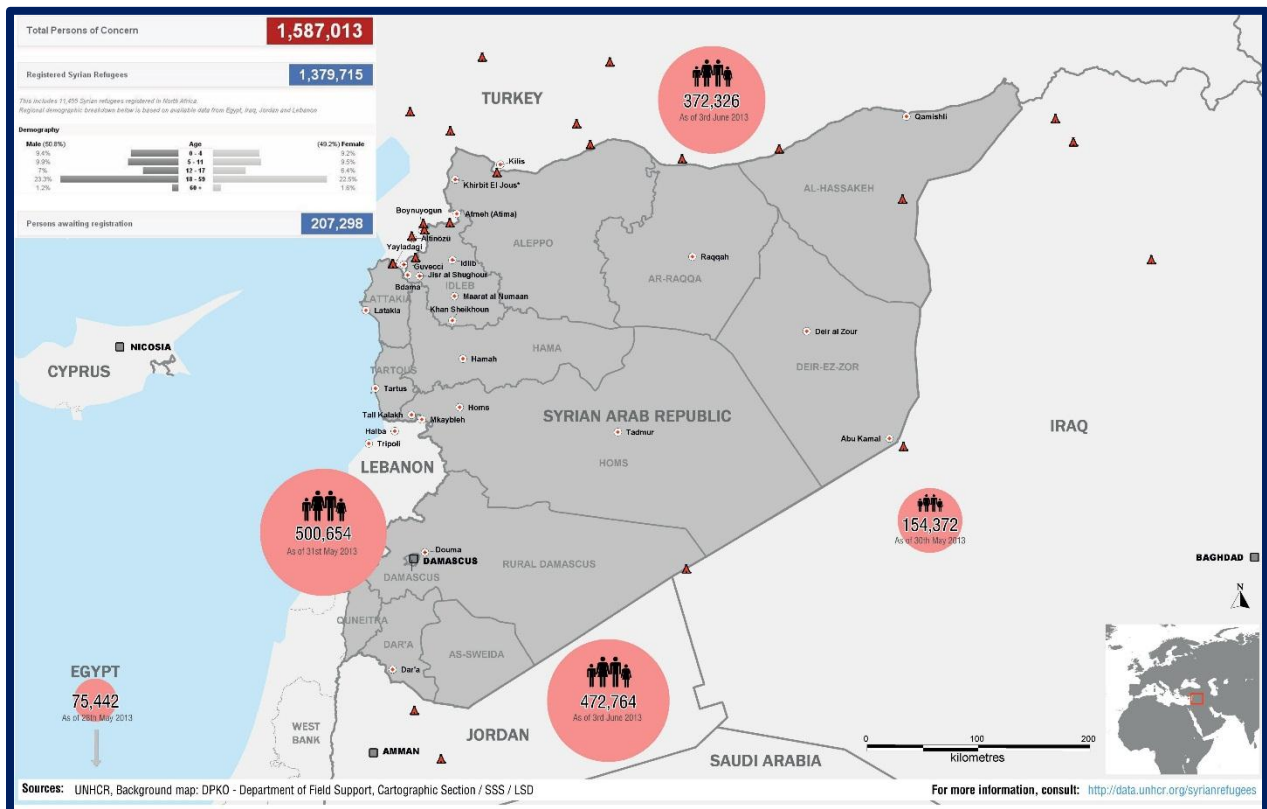
- The Government of Lebanon is expected to keep the border open. Syrian refugees who enter through an official border crossing (87 percent of all refugees) and register with both UNHCR and the government are given a six month residency permit free-of-charge. This permit allows them to work. However, it is unclear if refugees in the future will be required to pay for renewal residency permits.
- There are no camps in Lebanon. Instead, refugees live in approximately 1,400 localities across the country, often moving to areas where they have family or family connections, often Syrian migrants already in the country. Refugees live in a variety of substandard housing, including homes and apartments. As rents increase and communities reach saturation points, refugees have begun to live in abandoned or unused buildings, informal collective centers and open shelters, or improve “tented settlements” with no sanitation and in flood-prone areas. UNHCR estimates that by the end of the year, 70 percent of refugees will need shelter assistance.
- Competition for already limited social services and jobs is dramatically straining an already declining economy suffering from the loss of cross-border trade with Syria due to the conflict, rising inflation, and security concerns. In fact, the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in some of the poorest areas of the country with relatively higher unemployment and poverty rates. UNHCR reports that increased local tensions have resulted in evictions, displacements and violent incidents in some areas.

### Turkey

- According to UNHCR, as of July 18, Turkey hosts more than 413,000 Syrian refugees. UNHCR and the Government of Turkey (GoT) estimate that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey by the end of 2013 could increase to one million, with 300,000 living in camps and 700,000 outside of camps.
- While the Syrian-Turkish border remains open to Syrian refugees, USCIRF was told that the Turkish government manages the number and profile of Syrians who can enter Turkey each day. As such, thousands of Syrians waiting to flee Syria into Turkey are waiting for entry along the border.
- Refugees in Turkey live in both camp and non-camp settings; 199,083 live in camps and 187,883 outside camps. The GoT operates 17 different camps in 10 different provinces in the south of the country, with new camps under construction.
- NGOs report to USCIRF that Syriac Christians in Turkey are choosing to stay at Christian churches or monasteries. The GoT reportedly has opened special camps for Christian and

Kurdish Syrian refugees in an attempt to prevent the sectarian violence in Syria from spilling over into the refugee population.

- Continuous arrivals from Syria are increasing pressure on existing refugee camps. This is particularly true for communities of small family farms within 5km of the Syrian border which are hosting Syrian refugees. The conflict has cost these families and communities more than half of their annual household incomes due to a loss of cross-border trade.
- In October 2011, the GoT provided a temporary protection regime to all Syrians and Palestinians in the country who had formerly lived in Syria. In January 2013, the government announced that all non-camp Syrian refugees can access free medical services at national health facilities. Additionally, any Syrian arriving with a passport can register with the Foreigners Police Department to receive a residence permit. The Prime Ministry’s Emergency and Disaster Management Presidency (AFAD), in conjunction with the Turkish Red Crescent Society, provides all Syrians in camps with a robust array of services, including food, health, social activities, education, interpretation, communication, banking, and vocational training.



\*Map and figures UNHCR, from May 2013.  
For updated numbers, see the UNHCR Report: [STORIES FROM SYRIAN REFUGEES](#).