

Refugees at Risk in Jordan's Response to COVID-19

[Reva Dhingra](#) 04.8.2020

On March 21, 2020 air raid sirens sounded across Jordan's cities. The sirens marked the start of one of the most extensive lockdowns to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus—not just within the Middle East, but in the [world](#). Despite implementation challenges, the Jordanian government's efforts to mitigate the effects of COVID-19—the disease caused by the coronavirus—on its population have received praise [domestically](#). Yet, while draconian measures may be necessary in the face of the most serious global health crisis of the modern era, they also risk significant collateral damage.

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Low-income and marginalized communities everywhere are the most vulnerable to the virus, including the nearly 26 million [refugees](#) displaced across the globe living in crowded cities, camps and settlements. Jordan is host to the second-largest number of refugees per capita in the world, with [approximately](#) 750,000 refugees. While refugees of 57 different nationalities are present in Jordan, the majority are Syrian, followed by those from Iraq, Yemen and Sudan. The government relies on significant international support to both aid refugees and keep its economy afloat. But the rapid rollout of strict containment measures has disrupted aid activities, threatened livelihoods and failed to take into account the needs of both refugees and vulnerable Jordanians. With the effects of the lockdown being felt by a wide swathe of Jordanian society, refugees are at risk of falling through the cracks.

Jordan's Unprecedented Lockdown

Until March 14, Jordan had reported only a [single](#) case of COVID-19. Fear of the virus's spread, however, prompted the government to announce the closure of its borders, schools and many non-essential businesses on March 14. The government subsequently [declared](#) a state of emergency on March 17 and restricted both citizens and non-citizens to their homes until further notice under [penalty](#) of imprisonment. With little warning, residents of Jordan were forbidden from leaving home even for groceries or medicine for three days, with the potential for the lockdown to continue indefinitely.

But without a concrete plan for residents to meet basic needs, the total lockdown quickly gave way to chaos. Attempts by the government to distribute bread on March 24 resulted in [crowds](#) and shortages, particularly in [impoverished](#) and urban neighborhoods. The government subsequently eased restrictions to allow grocery stores, pharmacies and bakeries to open from

10am to 6pm for pedestrians. Jordan remains under a strict curfew that prohibits vehicle traffic and maintains the closure of borders, schools and all non-essential businesses.

The restrictions reflect the government's awareness of the potential for disastrous consequences if COVID-19 were to spread, for both Jordanians and non-Jordanians. The additional health threats posed to displaced populations by coronavirus are widely [understood](#). The vast majority of refugees in Jordan, [83 percent](#), live in urban areas outside of refugee camps. In both camps and urban areas, existing challenges in healthcare access, crowding and lack of sanitation and hygiene facilities would contribute to the virus's rapid spread. Both Syrian and non-Syrian refugees are able to access either public or private hospitals in Jordan, with Syrians receiving subsidized access to government hospitals and non-Syrians [accessing](#) clinics with limited support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Caritas. According to a 2019 [report](#), however, 82 percent of Syrian refugees reported needing to borrow money in order to access urgent health care. Syrian refugees also suffer from both chronic and acute health conditions at [higher rates](#) than Jordanians. Non-Syrian refugees also do not [receive](#) the same level of healthcare support as Syrian refugees.

The living conditions of refugees present a further challenge to containing the spread of disease. Two-thirds of [households](#) living in Jordan's Syrian refugee camps have more than three people per room, making effective self-isolation impossible. Social distancing in public is also difficult in the two densely populated main camps, Zaatari (hosting about 76,000 refugees) and Azraq (about 36,000). In urban areas, Syrian refugees live in similarly crowded settings, with dwellings consisting of two or three rooms for households of five or more.

The Collateral Damage of Containment Measures

Yet containment efforts in response to the possible spread of COVID-19 are also themselves negatively impacting marginalized communities, including refugees. Most refugees do not have the economic means to stock up on supplies necessary for a lockdown. Approximately 80 percent of Syrian refugees live under the poverty line and only two [percent](#) of households have savings. Following the announcement of travel restrictions, refugees I spoke to living in Zaatari refugee camp reported an immediate increase in prices at stores in the camp's main market.[\[1\]](#) Similar price inflation has been reported outside of the camp, though the government has increased [efforts](#) to enforce price ceilings.

Without access to income, many refugees will be unable to purchase necessities or pay for rent during a lockdown of even just one month.

Since the majority of refugees do not rely solely or even [primarily](#) on international assistance for income, the economic freeze will cause refugee resources to dry up. Syrian refugees work mainly in construction, manufacturing and retail—jobs that cannot be worked remotely. On March 14, Syrians living in Jordan's refugee camps were notified that they would be prevented from leaving the camp until further notice, even those with valid work permits. Salaries for many refugees working with international organizations have also been suspended as programs shut down.[\[2\]](#) Without access to

income, many refugees will be unable to purchase necessities or pay for rent during a lockdown of even just one month.

The suspension of schooling and social programming will also negatively affect Syrian children in Jordan, 40 percent of whom are [already](#) out of school. Remote learning is being piloted by the Jordanian Ministry of Education, including lessons [delivered](#) via national television, a website and a smartphone app. While the suspension is temporary, the current solutions do not take into account the lack of resources available to both refugees and low-income Jordanians.

“Many people have televisions,” said Ahmad, a Syrian refugee and father of two living in Zaatari, “but we don’t have electricity all the time. The NGOs have said that they may increase the electricity and water because people are at home and for children to be able to watch the education programs.” At the end of March, the UN did [increase](#) the supply of electricity from eight to 12 hours a day for refugee households living in the camps. A survey run by the Jordanian Ministry of Education [noted](#), however, that only 70 percent of students nationwide were able to access the distance learning program—33 percent through television and the remainder through other sources. Only 2 [percent](#) of refugee households own computers.

The Shifting Role of International Aid

The Jordanian government has established a national crisis management team to take charge of efforts to quarantine and prevent the coronavirus from spreading further. Acknowledging the impact of restrictions on the country’s poor, the government has established a [fund](#) through the Ministry of Social Development for needy Jordanian families, drawn from a list of National Aid Fund recipients. Bilateral and multilateral donors, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are contributing to the fund, in addition to private sector funding. The government has also coordinated with the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization to distribute [food assistance](#), with both measures reaching [approximately](#) 350,000 Jordanian families.

Government representatives have [stated](#) to the media that Jordanians and non-Jordanians are “part of the same system.” But with a third of the population under the poverty line during at least [one quarter](#) of the year and an already dire economic situation, scarce resources for basic needs will be stretched even further. The government has therefore [called](#) on international support to provide services to refugees.

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The restrictions on mobility within Jordan and across the border, however, threaten the flow of international assistance that is critical for many refugees’ daily lives. After the initial announcement of a national emergency, aid organizations in Jordan suspended or scaled back on many activities outside of essential programs such as healthcare and sanitation. The lockdown also initially affected existing aid distribution systems due to confusion over the restrictions on mobility. [\[3\]](#) United Nations cluster group meetings responsible for coordinating and overseeing assistance were postponed and NGO employees’

entry to the camps was restricted. Some refugees are confused over what support should be expected. “We thought that NGOs might distribute more hygiene products or emergency support, but until now that hasn’t happened,” noted Amjad, a Syrian refugee also living in Zaatari, when I spoke to him on March 20.[\[4\]](#)

Aid workers involved in the coordination and management of assistance are trying to keep up with a rapidly changing situation, with one aid worker I spoke to noting that the level of the restrictions took them by surprise.[\[5\]](#) Organizations are coordinating with the government to potentially distribute hygiene items and continue critical assistance for both Syrian and non-Syrian refugees. Rapid measures such as emergency direct in-kind and cash assistance for families would help ensure that they have access to necessary goods. Cash assistance, however, may be [out of reach](#) unless there is additional funding.

Many organizations in Jordan are also redirecting funds from ongoing programs to the emergency pandemic response. One donor is working to reallocate funding for an ongoing municipal program towards increasing stocks of personal protective equipment and medical supplies.[\[6\]](#) The European Union announced that 60 million euros in funding, newly [committed](#) as part of ongoing refugee response efforts focusing on health and education, will now be directed in part to supporting Jordan in its coronavirus response. Redistributing aid from existing sources without significant additional support will, however, have long-term negative effects on programs for refugees and vulnerable Jordanians alike.

An Uncertain Future

The dilemmas currently facing Jordan mirror challenges countries are confronting across the globe. Jordan has understandably focused on mitigating a global health threat of unprecedented proportions. Yet, the government’s responses may be at the expense of the already marginalized. Refugees face compounded challenges as a result of difficult living conditions, limited healthcare access, economic insecurity and a reliance on humanitarian assistance. The social and economic consequences of labor restrictions and disruption to international aid for refugees and vulnerable host community members are only likely to worsen over the coming months.

No refugee in Jordan had been diagnosed with COVID-19 as of the [beginning](#) of April. Yet Syrian refugees I spoke to acknowledged the need for severe measures to combat the coronavirus and expressed fear of its spread among their community. “I think it’s appropriate the government closed the camp,” noted Ahmad. While he is able to continue to work remotely for an international organization, he is concerned for those refugees who have lost their sources of income. Excluded from Jordan’s social safety net, refugees’ access to the resources necessary to survive lockdown will remain the responsibility of international organizations. But as donor countries respond to the pandemic within their own borders, the level of help needed may not be coming for Jordan anytime soon.

[Front page photo: An ambulance on empty streets after the start of a nationwide curfew, amid concerns over the spread of COVID-19, in Amman, Jordan. March 21, 2020. Muhammad Hamed/Reuters]

Endnotes

[1] Interview with Ahmad (not his real name), March 18 2020.

[2] Correspondence with aid worker, March 28, 2020.

[3] Correspondence with aid worker, March 20, 2020.

[4] Interview with Amjad (not his real name), March 20, 2020.

[5] Correspondence with aid worker, March 18, 2020.

[6] Correspondence with aid worker, March 26, 2020.

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