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Blessed Investors and Cursed Refugees: A Reading of Syrian Presence in Jordan

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Syrian migration is no novelty for the Syrian society, nor for the other countries of the historical *Bilad Al Sham*, or Western societies. Family, social, and economic relationships on coupled with Ottoman and mandate governances allowed the construction of a political narrative that puts Greater Syria at the core of an Arab nationalist ideology. The latter considers the national borders of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine as by product of colonial policies to be abandoned. Additionally, the Palestinian exodus in 1948 highlighted the fragility of this narrative, as Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan put their interests as nation-states as top priorities and viewed Palestinian refugees as outsiders to the existing social structures in each country. Furthermore, the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution in 2011 with its descent into a bloody conflict and the forced displacement of millions of Syrians destroyed the remnants of this Arab nationalist rhetoric.

In the large picture, Jordan is a quite recent nation state, geographically, politically, as well as socially. Unlike the other Levantine countries, Jordan's territory and social components were part of different and fluctuating provinces during the Ottoman period. Additionally, the urban makeup of Transjordan was limited to a handful of cities along the Hejaz Railway, whose administration, economy, and education were linked to Damascus. Even though the Emirate of Transjordan dates back to 1921, the structures of a contemporary nation-state were only established with the influx of Palestinian refugees. In fact, the history of the Hashemite kingdom has been marked with consecutive waves of migration: the 1948 and 1967 exoduses, the returnees from Gulf States in 1989, Iraqi refugees in 1990 and 2003, as well as waves of Asian and Egyptian migrant workers.

The Syrian Revolution laid the foundation for a new historical reality marked by the forcible displacement of nearly twelve million Syrians, 5.6 million of whom left Syria for Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, the Gulf States and other countries outside the region.¹ Jordan has officially welcomed 673,000 Syrian refugees² with significant social, economic, and political consequences on the domestic and regional scales.³

This paper will analyze the arrival of Syrians in Jordan since 2011, with a specific focus on the relationship between historical and current Syrian diaspora as well as the policies implemented by Jordanian authorities as a response.



Ancient and rooted ties on both sides of the borders

The Syrian presence on the east side of Jordan river predates the founding of the current Jordanian state with its current borders. It would be more accurate to examine this settlement within the context of what historians refer to as *Bilad Al Sham* the Levant, a term that has been coined by Arab nationalist currents to promote a common identity that encompasses the Arab World from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf. If we refer to the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, we must pay attention to movement of merchants, students, pilgrims, and civil servants of the Sublime Porte, that connected Al Karak in Jordan with Istanbul through Madaba, Salt, Irbid, Damascus, and Aleppo. One must pay similar attention to their individual, family, and collective journeys. Most of Transjordan territory was part of the Ottoman Sham Province at the time, though some Transjordanian cities were connected to Palestinian ones, such as Salt and Irbid with Naplouse, as well as Al Karak with Hebron. One should also mention Hauran plateau, whose historical land covers current Southern Syria and Northern Jordan, including the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon in Lebanon. In Hauran plain, agrarian groups from various confessions – Druze, Christian, and Sunni – coexisted with Bedouin tribes that mostly settled there at the beginning of the twentieth century, when British and French powers started to exert their influence in Bilad Al-Cham.⁴ These social components created a complex economy that integrated agriculture, livestock, and various forms of trade, including smuggling.⁵

This snapshot serves as a preface to highlight the shared history that must be considered when examining the Syrian presence in Jordan. This history is evident in the similar names of towns and districts on both sides of the border, such as Al Tayba and Al Karak. Similarly, clans and families inherit and share surnames that refer to a common past and present. For example, surnames such as Al Zubi, Al Rifai, Abu Qura, Al Shar', Al Sarhan, Al Batayneh, Al Alawneh, Al Shreideh, and Al Miqdad, Al Assoud, are common on both sides of the border.

“Damascenes” played a fundamental role in building the political, economic, and cultural foundations of the modern state of Jordan. Likewise, prominent Syrian figures who had served in the Ottoman administration played a key role in the



establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan, as King Abdullah-I needed educated elites to oversee the affairs of the emerging emirate. A prominent figure, of Lebanese birth and Druze confession, and Ottoman education, Rasheed Talee, is an example of this historical moment. He served as an *mutasarrif* to Tripoli-Damascus, Latakia, and Hauran, and was later appointed as the first Prime Minister of Transjordan in 1921.⁶ He was succeeded by Mazhar Arslan in 1922, followed by Ali Rida Al Rikabi and Hasan Khaled Abu Al Huda, all of whom were political and administrative elite and grew up in Syria. Although some attribute these nominations to King Fayçal's plan in the early 1920s to rule over a United Arab Kingdom, and to the British and French conflict that caused some Damascene families to flee to Irbid and Amman, these appointments still reflect the porosity of affiliations, positions, and borders at the time.

Higher administration was not the only field that the Syrians historically contributed to in Jordan's state building. In fact, the founder of the Jordan's Electricity Company, Haj Muhammad Al Bdeir, was originally from Syria. Additionally, the Al Tabba family, who opposed the French presence in Syria and fled to Amman in 1925, established several companies, including Jordan's Tobacco Company, the Cement Corporation, and Aliyah Airlines. In the trade industry, the Al Aqqad family was influential in the textile business, as well as the Sukkariyah market in Amman, which was named after a successful Damascene tradesman. This historical connection between Syria and Jordan continues today. Many Jordanian authorities are of Syrian descent, such as the current Director of General Intelligence Adnan Al Jundi, Dr. Fareez Al Salti, the current Governor of the Central Bank, and the former Director of General Intelligence, General Muhammad Al Zahabi.

Revolution in Syria and restlessness in Jordan

When the former Jordanian Prime Minister Fayez Tarawneh stated that a Jordanian spring “would never be red”,⁷ he was referring to the transformation of the Syrian revolution into a violent civil conflict, in order to control the protests in numerous Jordanian regions that peaked in mid-October 2012 (union demands,



political participation, life's cost and corruption, etc.). Consequently, the Jordanian government promised some reform, however, many were never addressed for fear that the worsening situation in Syria could influence domestic affairs in Jordan.

At the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Syrian nationals could cross the Jordanian border with no more than an ID card. They were welcome “home”. This expression was not only a courtesy used in public speeches but also, it reflected a social reality: Irbid, Ramtha, Al Mafraq and many northern Jordanian villages were opened to relatives and acquaintances fleeing from the other side of the border. After mid-2012, however, the situation changed, particularly after the explosion in Damascus that killed senior officials of the famous Crisis Cell. Following this event, the Syrian regime systematically resorted to violent bombardments, forcing the population in targeted neighbourhoods to flock to the nearest border crossings.

The Jordanian officials strove to create an equilibrium : condemning the Syrian regime without severing relations with its representatives; responding to international communities requests and hosting conferences for Syrian opposition forces, without preventing Assad's advocates from forming delegations to visit the Syrian regime; accepting an American-supported military base to train the Free Syrian Army, without ceasing to declare its neutrality towards the Syrian conflict. Such official manoeuvres reflect Jordan's role in managing regional crises. However, the Syrian conflict went hand in hand with increased unrest in Jordan due to the rise in the cost of living. As a result, the Jordanian regime used the situation in Syria as an excuse to explain the tense domestic situation and to justify its reluctance to commit to a political reform process.⁸ In this context, a new social group in Jordanian and Syrian history began to emerge — the Syrian refugees.

Cursed refugees...

With the Assad regime resorting to airstrikes, Syrians began to seek refuge, in thousands, along the Jordanian border while Jordanian authorities harassed Syrians that were once welcomed a few months earlier. Meanwhile, a stereotype of the Syrian refugee began to emerge, one that was reinforced by conflicting official



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estimations of the number of refugees. Jordanian newspapers that referred to hundreds of refugees in 2012 were reporting that up to 1.2 million Syrian refugees were present in Jordan, before finally reporting that 673,000 refugees had officially registered with the UNHCR.⁹

Likewise, public policy reinforced this image. The refugees arriving massively to Jordan were used as a pretext to justify the lack of a clear and comprehensive political vision to develop adequate policies in managing pressures imposed on infrastructure and resources, especially in cities. Negotiations with international actors took considerable time before Jordanian authorities began the construction in 2014 of the Zaatari refugee camp, the first one for Syrian refugees. At that time, the camp was intended to house 100,000 people, similar to the population of a large town. Furthermore, the authorities implemented conditions for entry to and exit from the camp. Currently, there are six camps for Syrian refugees in Jordan, where residents are subject to similar conditions.

Syrian camps are considered to be hotbeds of insecurity that require special management measures to combat terrorism, specifically the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This image reflected largely on the camps' residents and extended to the majority of Syrians. In a parliamentary session in 2013, a member of Parliament described Syrian refugees as invaders who threatened local people in terms of population, economy, and morals¹⁰: according to this parliamentarian, they steal bread from Jordanians and encourage drug use and prostitution. This hate speech found its way to parts of the Jordanian middle class, already under high economic pressure, and was promoted by media professionals, politicians, and activists from the Arab nationalist left led by the late journalist Nahed Hattar, an unconditional supporter of the Syrian regime.¹¹

The emergence of the Al Nusra Front and ISIS did not improve the image of Syrians in the public discourse. Instead, it served to reinforce the stereotype that they are thieves, pimps, and drug dealers, as well as terrorists. This discourse overlapped with a policy adopted by Jordan in the early spring of 2015 that closed all land borders for Syrian civilians and imposed conditions for entry into the country, such as acquiring a security clearance for Syrian passport holders or having a sponsor residing in Jordan.



The stigma around Syrian refugees in Jordan reflects the curse of history, combined with the failures of Jordanian public policies, in a tense regional and international environment that underestimated the impact of the Arab revolutions. As a result, the refugee has become a cursed being paying a double price for standing up against a dictator: forcibly fleeing his country and being stigmatized in host country. Even official Syrian authorities, who are meant to protect Syrian nationals, condemn refugees that they deem unworthy of Syrian citizenship, and express satisfaction to see a more “homogeneous” Syrian society emerge as a result.¹² This powerful stigmatization in the media has allowed host countries room to implement various policies targeting refugees. However, the coexistence of host societies and refugees, in general, is inconsistent with the hate speech that Syrian regime supporters adopt.

... and blessed investors

Despite the so-called burden refugees place on infrastructure, these newcomers possess many traditional skills, professional qualifications, as well as financial capital. At the outset of the Syrian revolution, Syrian capital began flowing into Jordan. This situation differed from that of the Iraqi migration in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as Iraqis viewed Jordan only as a step in their journey to Europe, and therefore did not invest in a productive and sustainable way in the Jordanian economy. Syrian investors, particularly tradesmen and manufacturers, devised a strategy dependent on family ties and cross-border business networks that have been active for decades. Consequently, they transferred to Jordan their capital and their skills.

In fact, many products in the Jordanian market, such as clothes, sweets, as well as agricultural and food products, are imported from Syria or Turkey. The worsening situation in Syria produced a paradoxical situation: the conflict severed commercial exchange with Turkey and deprived the Jordanian market of various Syrian products but encouraged other investment networks that greatly benefited both Syrians and Jordanians. As a result, construction thrived in Northern Jordan and Amman along with multiple other industries such as restaurants, textile, shoes, furniture, grocery, and car repair shops, etc.



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In other words, the arrival of Syrians with their skills and capital had a direct impact on the Jordanian economy. In agriculture, Syrian labour increased in the Jordan Valley.¹³ In the industry sector, Syrian investors moved their food, medicine, furniture and clothes factories to areas in Irbid, Sahab, and Al Aqaba. Additionally, there was a significant increase in the number of cafes, restaurants, and shops in Jordanian cities, most of them run by Syrians who brought their favourite brands with them: beside the Ghraoui sweets that have already a branch in Amman, one can find Bakdash, a famous ice cream family factory that one could only find in Damascus.

A series of interviews were conducted with Syrian businessmen and investors in different sectors such as the currency exchange, mobile phones, oriental decoration, the food industry, solar heating, and cement manufacturing, who reside in Jordan. Some of them left Syria shortly after the 1982 Hama massacre while others moved their businesses to Amman in 2011. All of them indicated that they came from well-established merchant families from Damascus. A few of the interviewees expressed their opposition to the Syrian regime while the rest focused on their initial positive relationship with Syrian authorities that soon turned into gradual blackmail from Syrian intelligence service. It was this abrupt shift that prompted them to flee to Jordan out of fear for their families, their life, and their interests.

The interviews demonstrated that each businessperson was trying to dissociate themselves from politics, and, therefore, their solidarity with their fellow Syrians was limited to charity works and providing employment. Additionally, they referred to massive administrative difficulties they faced with trade and industry licenses and the customs services, which discourage investors from staying in Jordan and push them to transfer their money either in part or in full to Turkey. One investor stated that “if the Jordanian authorities had presented a more flexible tax policy towards Syrian investors, no single Syrian would have had to look for work in Jordan.”

Such a statement is an attempt to connect wealthy Syrians and their less fortunate country fellows. It also refers to the “dynamism” of Syrians, and their capacity to create economic opportunities. Such a narrative joins another positive stereotype widespread within Jordanian society, about the quick adaptability of Syrians,



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without taking into account other economic factors, such as the low cost of Syrian labour, the stagnation of Jordanian market, and the lack of juridical framework that regulates wages.

The interviews also demonstrated the investors have taken an interest in improving the situation in Syria. Although they all expressed their wish to return home and stressed the fact that they were in touch with their relatives inside Syria, they listed safety and the integrity of public institutions as conditions to investing again in Syria. They also highlighted the fact that their contributions to reconstruction in Syria would be on the family and local levels only, as trust plays a crucial role in relationships.

Last but not least, Jordan has also received regional and international aid and grants for hosting Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011. These grants are in addition to the funds that support nongovernmental programmes already established by national and international NGOs for this purpose. These grants amount to hundreds of millions of dollars annually and integrate the Jordanian economy. Although the influx of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Jordan does create some economic burdens, it is simultaneously accompanied by an increase in mechanisms and policies that aim to integrate Syrians into the job market. And although the Nusaybin border crossing between Jordan and Turkey was opened for trade on 15 October 2018,¹⁴ Jordanian authorities would likely prefer that the refugees return to Syria but keep their capital in Jordan. In fact, the withdrawal of the large amount of Syrian capital that arrived in Jordan after 2011 would result in a virtual collapse of the economy. Currently, Jordanian policies have largely respected international recommendations and the European Union's conditions regarding (the employment of a percentage of refugees in factories that export their products to Europe), and authorized Syrians to work in some professional sectors. However, it is still hard for them to get permanent residence, to have access to healthcare and universities, a problem they share with several categories of Jordan inhabitants.



Endnotes

1. UNHCR, 2018.
2. Hana JABER, « Réfugiés syriens en Jordanie : choc démographique, résilience et vulnérabilités », *Confluences*, n°99, 2016-2017.
3. Hana JABER, « Qui accueille vraiment les réfugiés ? », *Le Monde Diplomatique*, octobre 2015.
4. As well as Jewish communities that crossed the Jordan westwards after the situation intensified in the forties of the last century.
5. Smuggling was common along the borderline between British and French mandate territories.
6. It is worth noting that Rasheed Talee' died and was buried in 1926 in a village close to Sweida in a sign of intersectionality of affiliations at the time.
7. Al-Rai, "The Jordanian Spring Will Not Turn Red", 30 April 2012 (In Arabic) available at goo.gl/a8DnXh
8. Hana Jaber, "Protests and Opposition Against the Backdrop of the Syrian Crisis", Arab Reform Initiative, 25/07/2014, available at: arab-reform.net/en/node/480
9. Hana Jaber, *Confluences*, op. cit
10. Al-Madina News, 27 March 2013, in Arabic, available at: youtube.com/watch?v=Z9yG1KJnbzM
11. Nahed Hattar published in *Al-Akhbar* newspaper on 9 September 2015, an insulting article towards Syrian refugees. The newspaper later retrieved the article and apologized publicly for its publication.
12. Speech by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad at the opening of the Conference of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants in Damascus, 20 August 2017, in Arabic, available at youtube.com/watch?v=SkK9KttSdQc
13. In the discourse condemning Syrian presence, we often read complaints about the competitiveness against Jordanian labor. In the agriculture sector in particular, competition is in actual fact due to Egyptian labor. This, however, is outside the scope of this research study.
14. The borders are not open for all public.



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About the author



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Hana Jaber worked as a senior research fellow at the Arab Reform Initiative, where her work focused on the follow-up and coordination of projects and the development of new fieldwork on Syrian exodus and diaspora. Her research concerns are population movements and related issues.

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