

# Refugee Protection in Jordan and Lebanon: Legal Frameworks, Service Provision, and Socioeconomic Challenges in a Turbulent Region

MEERA HAMED FALAH ALMA'AITAH<sup>1</sup>

*This article examines the complex landscape of refugee protection in Jordan and Lebanon. Both countries, despite hosting millions of refugees, have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. Consequently, they rely on temporary arrangements and ad hoc policies that leave refugees vulnerable. The study compares the legal frameworks and service provision in both nations, analyses their dependence on international aid, and discusses the broader economic and political challenges shaping refugee management in the region. Policy recommendations are provided to encourage the development of sustainable legal and institutional solutions.<sup>2</sup>*

**Keywords:** *refugee protection, Jordan, Lebanon, legal frameworks, international aid, service provision, refugee law, socioeconomic challenges, Middle East, asylum policy*

## Introduction

In recent decades, the Middle East has witnessed unprecedented displacement due to conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and beyond. Jordan and Lebanon have become primary hosts for millions of refugees, yet both countries lack a comprehensive legal framework to protect refugee rights. This article explores how these nations manage refugee populations in the absence of ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. By examining national policies, international agreements, and the real-world impact on refugees' lives, the study highlights the urgent need for legal reforms and enhanced international cooperation. These issues are framed within broader debates on migration, human rights, and state sovereignty.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Géza Marton Doctoral School of Legal Studies, University of Debrecen.

<sup>2</sup> BETTS–COLLIER 2017; CRISP 2003; KOSER 2020; CARENS 2013.

<sup>3</sup> BETTS–COLLIER 2017; KOSER 2020; CARENS 2013.

## Legal frameworks and international agreements

### *Jordan's legal approach*

Jordan has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention; instead, it relies on a 1998 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to manage refugee affairs. Under this MoU, refugees are granted temporary protection and are designated as “guests” rather than as individuals with full legal status. Additionally, Palestinian refugees in Jordan are administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), with many eventually receiving Jordanian citizenship. Although these measures provide a semblance of stability, they are inherently temporary and do not address the long-term needs or rights of refugees. Recent analyses highlight that such temporary measures often leave refugees in legal limbo.<sup>4</sup>

### *Lebanon's legal approach*

Lebanon's response is markedly different. Like Jordan, Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention; however, it does not formalise any special legal status for refugees. Instead, refugees in Lebanon are treated as “displaced persons” without the benefits of an official legal framework. The absence of a formal agreement with UNHCR means that refugee registration is inconsistent and largely dependent on emergency measures. This approach allows the Lebanese government to avoid long-term commitments while leaving refugees without stable legal protection. Scholarly research indicates that this ad hoc method exacerbates refugees' vulnerabilities and perpetuates exclusion.<sup>5</sup>

## Provision of services and socioeconomic impact

### *Service provision in Jordan*

Through the MoU with UNHCR, Jordan has developed a system that, while limited, offers refugees access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and legal documentation. Syrian refugees, who constitute a significant portion of the refugee population, are provided with temporary work permits in sectors like agriculture, construction, and services. Nonetheless, these permits are restrictive, and many refugees find themselves pushed into the informal labour market where exploitation is common. The strain on public services, particularly in densely populated refugee camps such as

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.unhcr.org/jordan.html>; <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>; KOSER 2020; TURNER 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International 2021; CRISP 2003; FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH 2016.

Zaatari and Azraq, highlights the tension between humanitarian obligations and the country's economic constraints. This phenomenon has been documented in multiple field studies that underscore the challenges of maintaining service delivery under resource scarcity.<sup>6</sup>

### *Service provision in Lebanon*

In contrast, Lebanon's lack of a formal legal framework means that refugees face even more severe challenges. The government's reluctance to grant any form of official refugee status results in precarious residency conditions, with refugees often required to renew temporary permits under onerous terms. Employment opportunities are minimal because refugees must secure a Lebanese sponsor to work legally, leading to exploitation and informal labour arrangements. With over 1.5 million Syrian refugees living in urban areas or informal settlements, the competition for limited resources intensifies, exacerbating tensions between host communities and refugees. Studies have shown that these conditions result in high levels of poverty and social exclusion among refugee populations.<sup>7</sup>

### **The role of international aid and economic constraints**

Both Jordan and Lebanon are heavily dependent on international aid due to their limited economic resources. Humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR, UNRWA, UNICEF, and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide critical support for refugees, including food, shelter, education, and healthcare. In Jordan, cooperation with UNHCR under the MoU offers a relatively more predictable channel for aid, although it remains a temporary solution. In Lebanon, however, the distribution of aid is often inconsistent due to the absence of a formal framework, leaving refugees more vulnerable and further straining the national economy. This heavy reliance on external funding is a recurring theme in studies on refugee management, emphasising the unsustainable nature of current systems in both countries.<sup>8</sup>

### **Economic and political context in the Middle East**

The broader regional context is characterised by political instability and economic volatility. In the Middle East, ongoing conflicts and shifting geopolitical alliances have

---

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR 2019; PEITZ et al. 2023; GHANEM 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International 2021; FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH 2016.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR 2022; Amnesty International 2021; PEITZ et al. 2023; CARENS 2013.

resulted in massive displacements, placing additional burdens on host countries. Jordan's and Lebanon's fragile economies, marked by high unemployment rates and limited natural resources, are further strained by the influx of refugees. This situation leads to competition over scarce public services and contributes to social tensions. Political considerations, such as national security and demographic balance, further complicate the formulation and implementation of refugee policies. Academic research confirms that the interplay between political instability and economic constraints critically affects refugee integration and policy effectiveness.<sup>9</sup>

## Policy recommendations and future directions

Based on the comparative analysis, several key policy recommendations emerge:

1. Establishment of comprehensive refugee legislation  
Both Jordan and Lebanon should develop national refugee laws that align with international standards. Formal recognition of refugee status would provide legal stability and improve access to essential services. Such a framework could also reduce reliance on temporary arrangements and mitigate legal uncertainties.<sup>10</sup>
2. Expansion of work rights  
Relaxing work permit restrictions would allow refugees to integrate more fully into the formal economy, reducing exploitation and easing the economic burden on host countries. This includes removing restrictive sponsorship requirements and broadening the range of sectors available to refugees.<sup>11</sup>
3. Enhanced institutional cooperation  
Strengthening partnerships with international organisations – particularly UNHCR – could improve refugee registration systems and service delivery. Lebanon, in particular, should consider establishing a formal framework for working with UNHCR to ensure more consistent aid distribution.<sup>12</sup>
4. Economic and social integration programmes  
Investments in education, healthcare, and housing for refugees are essential. Public awareness campaigns to promote the positive contributions of refugees can help reduce social tensions. Integrated economic policies that include refugees in the labour market can create a win-win scenario for both refugees and host communities.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> World Bank 2021; CRISP 2003; BETTS–COLLIER 2017.

<sup>10</sup> KOSER 2018; CARENS 2013.

<sup>11</sup> PEITZ et al. 2023; BETTS–COLLIER 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See: <https://www.unhcr.org/jordan.html>; CRISP 2003.

<sup>13</sup> IRC 2020.; BETTS–COLLIER 2017.

5. Long-term funding solutions

Establishing stable, long-term funding mechanisms with international donors will help reduce reliance on short-term humanitarian aid and provide a more sustainable basis for refugee support.<sup>14</sup>

**Case studies and related works**

*Case study: Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan*

Zaatari camp, situated in northern Jordan, is one of the largest refugee camps in the world and serves as a critical case study in refugee management. Established in 2012 in response to the Syrian conflict, Zaatari now hosts over 80,000 refugees. Research has highlighted innovative aspects of the camp's self-management and community organisation, including community-led micro-enterprise initiatives that have fostered economic resilience among residents. Despite these successes, the camp faces ongoing challenges such as resource scarcity, overcrowding, and a heavy reliance on international aid.<sup>15</sup>

*Case study: Informal urban settlements in Lebanon*

In contrast to structured camps, many Syrian refugees in Lebanon reside in informal urban settlements across metropolitan areas such as Beirut and Tripoli. These settlements are marked by a lack of formal legal status and limited access to essential services like education, healthcare, and legal employment opportunities. Research by Crisp (2003) as well as Ezzedine, D. M. (2019) documents the significant social and economic challenges faced by refugees in these urban contexts. The dispersed nature of these settlements complicates government and humanitarian responses, often leading to heightened vulnerabilities and exploitation.<sup>16</sup>

**Comparative analysis: integration strategies in host countries**

Comparative studies have been instrumental in assessing the divergent integration strategies of Jordan and Lebanon. Lenner, K., & Turner, L. (2019) provides a comparative analysis that reveals refugees in Jordan generally benefit from more structured legal and institutional frameworks – particularly in areas adjacent to formal camps – whereas those in Lebanon encounter significant systemic hurdles. Key determinants for successful

---

<sup>14</sup> World Bank 2021; CARENS 2013.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR 2020; BETTS-BLOOM-WEAVER 2015.

<sup>16</sup> EZZEDINE 2019.

integration include access to education, secure legal employment, and comprehensive social services. These findings underscore that while legal reforms are essential, socio-economic integration measures are equally crucial in fostering long-term stability for refugee populations.<sup>17</sup>

## Related works and further readings

In addition to the case studies presented above, numerous academic works and reports offer in-depth insights into refugee protection and integration:

- UNHCR and UNRWA reports: These reports provide comprehensive data and policy analysis on refugee populations. For example, UNHCR's annual reports detail evolving challenges in camps like Zaatari, while UNRWA's publications focus on the situation of Palestinian refugees.
- Policy papers by international organisations: Institutions such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Amnesty International publish papers on refugee issues, highlighting both successful integration initiatives and ongoing challenges.<sup>18</sup>
- Academic journals: Peer-reviewed journals like the *Journal of Refugee Studies* and *International Migration Review* serve as valuable resources for the latest research on the legal, social, and economic dimensions of refugee protection.

## Conclusion

The refugee crisis in Jordan and Lebanon underscores broader challenges across the Middle East. Jordan's structured approach via its MoU with UNHCR provides some stability, yet many challenges remain. Conversely, Lebanon's ad hoc policies leave refugees in a state of legal limbo, with significant implications for access to services and overall wellbeing. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive legal reforms, expanded work rights, enhanced international cooperation, and long-term funding solutions. Furthermore, integrating refugees into national economies and social systems is vital for creating sustainable, inclusive societies. The inclusion of detailed case studies and comparative analyses in this article highlights both the successes and ongoing challenges in refugee protection, offering a robust foundation for future policy reforms.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> BETTS–COLLIER 2017.

<sup>18</sup> IRC 2020; Amnesty International 2021.

<sup>19</sup> KOSER 2018; Amnesty International 2021; BETTS–COLLIER 2017.

## References

- Amnesty International (2021): *Exploited and forgotten: Syrian refugees in Lebanon's Informal Economy*. Online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/5444/2021/en/>
- BETTS, Alexander – COLLIER, Paul (2017): *Refuge. Transforming a Broken Refugee System*. London: Penguin Random House.
- BETTS, Alexander – BLOOM, Louise – WEAVER, Nina (2015): *Refugee Innovation: Humanitarian Innovation that Starts with Communities*. Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. Online: <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/files-1/refugee-innovation-web.pdf>
- CARENS, Joseph H. (2013): *The Ethics of Immigration*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- CRISP, Jeff (2003): Refugee Protection in Regions of Origin: Potential and Challenges. *Migration Policy Institute*, 2003. december 1. Online: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-protection-regions-origin-potential-and-challenges>
- EZZEDINE, Dunia Mohamad (2019): *Shelter in Urban Displacement: A Case Study of Syrian Refugees in the Shatila Palestinian Refugee Camp, Beirut (Lebanon)*. American University of Beirut. Online: <https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/handle/10938/21820>
- FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH, Elena (2016): *Refugee–Refugee Relations in Contexts of Overlapping Displacement*. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Online: <https://doi.org/10.56949/2CTU2450>
- GHANEM, Hafez (2016): *The Arab Spring Five Years Later: Toward Greater Inclusiveness*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press. Online: <https://doi.org/10.5771/9780815727194>
- International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2020): *Pushed to the brink: The impact of COVID-19 on Lebanon's economic crisis and Syrian refugees*. International Rescue Committee. Online: <https://www.rescue.org/report/pushed-brink-impact-covid-19-lebanons-economic-crisis-and-syrian-refugees>
- KOSER, Khalid (2018): Refugees and Migrants. In WEISS, Thomas G. – WILKINSON, Rorden (eds.): *International Organization and Global Governance*. London: Routledge. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315301914-60>
- PEITZ, Laura – BALIKI, Ghassan – FERGUSON, Neil T. N. – BRÜCK, Tilman (2023): Do Work Permits Work? The Impacts of Formal Labor Market Integration of Syrian Refugees in Jordan. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 36(4), 955–983. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead064>
- TURNER, Lewis (2020): *Refugee Recognition Regime Country Profile: Jordan*. Refugee Recognition Regime Project. Online: [https://www.academia.edu/107312332/Refugee\\_Recognition\\_Regime\\_Country\\_Profile\\_Jordan](https://www.academia.edu/107312332/Refugee_Recognition_Regime_Country_Profile_Jordan)
- UNHCR (2020): *Jordan: Zaatar Camp Factsheet (December 2020)*. Online: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/84263>
- UNHCR (2022): *1951 Refugee Convention*. Online: <https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>
- World Bank (2021): *MENA Regional Update: Living with Debt: How Institutions Can Chart a Path to Recovery*. World Bank. Online: <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e1ee32f3549c5283c46ca44047843890-0280012021/world-bank-2021-mena-regional-update>