



COVID IN THE CAMPS: CHALLENGES TO REFUGEES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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May 8, 2020

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Conflicts and wars have become trademarks of the modern Middle East. The disputes have led to thousands of people fleeing their homes and taking shelter in neighboring countries. According to the latest figures available by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are more than 70 million displaced people worldwide.¹ Out of this number approximately 40 percent are refugees.² In the Middle East, the refugees are primarily from two countries- Syria and Palestine. The displacement has placed considerable burden on the region as a whole. It has also led to a systematic degeneration of refugee rights and standard of living.

Lebanon hosts nearly 200,000 Palestinian and about 1.5 million Syrian refugees.³ In Jordan, there are more than 2 million Palestinian refugees⁴ as well as almost 660,000⁵ Syrian war escapees. Turkey

¹ "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018," *UNHCR*.
<https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>

² "Figures at a Glance," *UNHCR*.
<https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

³ "Lebanon," Lebanon | Global Focus," *UNHCR*.
<http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2520>

⁴ "Jordan," *UNRWA*.
<https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan>

⁵ "Syrian refugees adapt to life under coronavirus lockdown in Jordan camps," *UNHCR*, April 2, 2020.
<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/4/5e84a3584/syrian-refugees-adapt-life-under-coronavirus-lockdown-jordan-camps.html>

provides shelter to the largest number of Syrian refugees. Only 64,000 of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees live in refugee camps while the rest are spread across 81 provinces of Turkey.⁶

Refugees and COVID-19

The unparalleled rate at which COVID-19 has spread all over the globe has underscored the imminent danger that internally displaced people and refugees face. On March 10, the UNHCR launched its COVID-19 appeal, in order to cultivate strategies which would help stipulate support for refugees the world over. On March 17, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) also launched a major fund-raising campaign to secure funds for the support of Palestinian refugees. On April 22, Commissioner of the UNHCR, Filip Grandi pointed out that cardinal principles of refugee protection were now being put to test and for this reason it was important that these vulnerable people should not be denied security and shelter under any circumstances.⁷

Efforts

In Lebanon, even though general mobilization across the country had been announced on March 15, the country confirmed its first case of the virus in a Palestinian refugee camp on April 22. Earlier, on March 28, an official from the Lebanese health ministry⁸ listed the measures which his country had been taking such as sterilizing roads and commercial establishments in the camps. He further stated that Lebanon was ready to share the refugee healthcare burden with the responsible UN agencies.

In Jordan, as per national policies, the camps along with the whole country have been on lockdown since March 21. The Jordanian army has been tasked with distributing basic necessities among various communities including the refugees.

In Turkey, according to a Presidential Decision issued on April 14⁹, all costs associated with measures against COVID-19 such as testing kits and medications were lifted. This law applies to both citizens and non-citizens. Moreover, despite the fact that President Erdogan had announced that Turkey

⁶ "Precarious lives: Syrian refugees in Turkey in corona times," *VOX, CEPR Policy Portal*, April 6, 2020. <https://voxeu.org/article/precarious-lives-syrian-refugees-turkey-corona-times>

⁷ "Beware long-term damage to human rights and refugee rights from the coronavirus pandemic: UNHCR," *UNHCR*, April 22, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/4/5ea035ba4/beware-long-term-damage-human-rights-refugee-rights-coronavirus-pandemic.html>

⁸ "Clamping down on refugees will not save Lebanon from the pandemic," *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/clamping-refugees-save-lebanon-pandemic-200411104018784.html>

⁹ "COVID-19 Emergency Response Update #3," *UNHCR Regional Bureau for Middle East and North Africa*, April 28, 2020. http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20MENA%20Regional%20COVID-19%20Update%20-%202028APR20_0.pdf

would no longer stop refugee migration into Europe, on March 13, the Turkish Government ordered closure of the border with Greece and announced that the refugees on the Turkey-Greek border would be settled in nine cities as a safeguard against the virus spread.¹⁰

The official UN COVID-19 response for the refugees has principally been coordinated with host governments. Humanitarian workers have been issuing healthcare instructions through SMS and putting up posters which showcase guidelines on how to preserve personal hygiene. The UNHCR has allocated soap and cleaning tools to Syrian refugees and has pledged to pay the costs of tests and treatment for them. In Lebanon, the UNHCR has committed to funding temporary expansions of six government hospitals in order to enhance the hospitals' response capacity to treat the virus patients (including the refugees). In Jordan, the UNHCR were given movement permits which would help them transport medicines in urban areas, where over 7000 refugees reside. In line with UNHCR's appeal, humanitarian organizations have also imposed preventive measures such as temperature screening in refugee camp entry ways. Moreover, the UN agency has been engaged in providing cash assistance to the refugees so as to reduce the negative socio-economic effects of Covid19.¹¹

Additionally, as a consequence of the pandemic, there have been acute shortages of protective material such as gloves, masks and disinfectants. However, undeterred by this, some refugees have started undertaking measures of their own. For example, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have been producing masks for themselves and for others in the camps.¹²

Challenges

Firstly, refugee camps provide an ideal environment for any virus to spread. Primarily so, because the people there live in conditions of severe overcrowding. For instance, almost 67 percent of households in Jordan's refugee camps host more than three people per room.¹³ Hence, systematic self-isolation is out of the question. Moreover, accessibility to water varies across camps this, causing a major impediment in carrying out even basic preventive measures of washing hands.

¹⁰ "Coronavirus is exacerbating the precarious situation of Syrian refugees and IDPs," *Atlantic Council*, March 27, 2020.

<https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/coronavirus-is-exacerbating-the-precarious-situation-of-syrian-refugees-and-idps/>

¹¹ "COVID-19 Emergency Response Update #3," *UNHCR Regional Bureau for Middle East and North Africa*, April 28, 2020.

http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20MENA%20Regional%20COVID-19%20Update%20-%2028APR20_0.pdf

¹² "The Covid-19 among MENA Refugees: A Great Humanitarian Concern," *ISPI*, April 9, 2020.

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/covid-19-among-mena-refugees-great-humanitarian-concern-25679>

¹³ "Refugees at Risk in Jordan's Response to COVID-19," *Relief Web*, April 8, 2020.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/refugees-risk-jordan-s-response-covid-19>

Secondly, in sync with the rise of COVID-19 cases, instances of xenophobia and anti-refugee discrimination have also increased. In Lebanon, officials have demanded that there be stricter curfew imposed in refugee camps entreating the long standing notion that these spaces are 'polluted'.¹⁴ In this regard, at least 21 cities in Lebanon have enforced bigoted restrictions on Syrian refugees which do not apply to Lebanese citizens.¹⁵ These ceilings have made it hard for health workers to travel through refugee camps thereby, undermining health efforts.

Here, it is important to mention the 'Turkish exception' in this regard. Syrian refugees are under 'temporary protection' in Turkey.¹⁶ Since 2013, they have had access to free medical assistance. The Turkish Government has set up around 182 health care centres in this respect.

Thirdly, many cities in both Lebanon and Jordan do not have the required support from the central government so as to address the needs of the Syrian refugees. Palestinians residing in Lebanon depend almost entirely on UNRWA support because they are barred from social services provided by the host government. At this point, it is important to point out that UNRWA has been experiencing severe fiscal restraints since the Trump administration withdrew funding in 2018.¹⁷ The increasing number of Covid cases has put a strain on the existing healthcare systems so much so in order to address the gaps in the overall COVID-19 response, local authorities have started turning to NGOs to help them out.

Recommendations

- Any response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 must be premised on the principle of inclusivity. All assistance - local and international- must take the refugee population into account. Host country governments need to put an end to all discriminatory practices.
- It is important that information campaigns about the virus should be disseminated to all communities hosting asylum seekers so that these people are kept abreast of the latest development and response efforts.

¹⁴ "COVID-19: Lebanon municipalities 'discriminate' against refugees," *Al Jazeera*, April 2, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-lebanon-municipalities-discriminate-refugees-200402154547215.html>

¹⁵ "Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in COVID-19 Response," *Human Rights Watch*, April 2, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>

¹⁶ "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey," *UNHCR*. <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>

¹⁷ "In One Move, Trump Eliminated US Funding for UNRWA and the US Role as Mideast Peacemaker," *Brookings*, September 7, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/07/in-one-move-trump-eliminated-us-funding-for-unrwa-and-the-us-role-as-mideast-peacemaker/>

- All aid groups should deploy qualified medical staff to refugee camps along with protective equipment for the on-ground humanitarian workers.
- Alleviation measures for overcrowding need to be taken and quarantine capacities need to be established in refugee camps. Food distribution services need to be re-engineered to avoid large congregations.
- Access to water and sanitation facilities need to be improved in refugee camps.