



ZA'ATARI REFUGEE CAMP, 10 YEARS ON

Stalled ambitions and lost hope, but durable solutions are possible

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Ten years since Za’atari refugee camp was established in Jordan’s northern desert, it has evolved into the world’s biggest Syrian refugee camp. The camp was set up as an emergency shelter; 10 years on, residents struggle to see a way out. This briefing note presents the perspectives of Syrian refugees on 10 years of life in Za’atari camp, their needs and their hopes, and it explores the impact of a series of external economic shocks on a community that has exhausted all safety nets. Finally, it offers recommendations to mitigate immediate vulnerabilities and facilitate durable solutions.

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This paper was written by Hannah Patchett. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Jassar Altahat, Ala Adas and Ayoub Yaseen in its production. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under
ISBN 978-1-78748-935-6 in August 2022.

DOI: 10.21201/2022.9356

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Cover photo: The sun sets over Za’atari refugee camp in Mafraq governorate, Jordan, on July 20, 2022. Credit: Rajiv Raman/Oxfam.

INTRODUCTION

It is a decade since the first tents were pitched in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan's northern desert to shelter Syrians who were arriving daily at the kingdom's border. Many had walked from communities in the border province of Dara'a, where Syria's uprising began, leaving behind homes, farms and jobs to escape a conflict that would kill more than 300,000 civilians.¹ Most thought the war would soon be over; few imagined that they'd still be in the camp, 12km from the border, 10 years later.

In the intervening years, Za'atari refugee camp has evolved into a sprawling settlement, the largest Syrian refugee camp in the world; a symbol of dispossession but also resilience. Rows of corrugated metal caravans have replaced tents. Schools and hospitals have been installed, as well as a water network and a solar plant. Currently, close to 82,000 refugees live in Za'atari, of whom 40% are younger than 11 years old and have never known life outside the camp, or life in Syria.²

According to Jordanian authorities, around 1.3 million Syrians have taken refuge in Jordan, mostly living in cities. 675,000 Syrians are registered as refugees in Jordan with UNHCR.³ A small country with scarce resources, Jordan nonetheless has a unique history as a haven for people fleeing regional strife, absorbing several waves of Palestinians and Iraqis among others. The scale of the Syrian refugee influx has strained services and infrastructure.⁴ Meanwhile, socioeconomic vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by a series of exogenous shocks including the economic fallout of the Syrian war and the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to unprecedented levels of unemployment in Jordan. Most recently, the crisis in Ukraine has driven up food prices in Jordan, which imports most of its food.

These global crises have shaken Jordan's most vulnerable people, especially Syrian refugees whose savings are long depleted and safety nets exhausted after a protracted exile. Prior to the pandemic, 35% of working-age Syrian refugees in Jordan were in work; this fell to 31% in 2021⁵ and to 27% in the first quarter of 2022.⁶ Of the Syrian refugees in work, more than 90% are in temporary jobs. Refugees are struggling to meet basic needs. Around one-third of refugees in Za'atari are eating fewer meals and more than two-thirds have bought food on credit according to a UNHCR survey in 2021.⁷ Since then, prices have risen further: the cost of food in Za'atari increased by 22% over just four months in 2022. With shrinking incomes and growing expenditure, 93% of Syrian households in Jordan are now in debt.⁸

With each shock, the vulnerabilities of refugees are compounded: after a protracted exile, Syrian refugees in Jordan face a burgeoning humanitarian crisis. At the same time, amid competing crises, humanitarian funding to support Syrian refugees in Jordan is in decline. As of July 2022, just 10% of Jordan's Humanitarian Response Plan was funded.

As Za'atari refugee camp reaches its tenth anniversary, Oxfam held focus group discussions with women, men, boys and girls in the camp to hear about their lives and how they see their futures. This briefing note presents these discussions and offers recommendations to support refugees, mitigate vulnerabilities and facilitate longer-term solutions.

TEN YEARS OF CAMP LIFE

The first arrivals to Za'atari refugee camp found a cluster of emergency tents in the desert. Of the camp's early days, one man recalled: 'We spent two months wishing we could see a fly. It was completely empty. After four months, a small butterfly flew by and crowds came out after it.'

Others remember their arrival as a period of shock and exhaustion, amplified by the anxiety of being surrounded by strangers. 'There was a lot of suffering, including dealing with others. We didn't know each other. People eventually started to get to know each other, but the start was exhausting', one man reflected. Like many refugees before them, the new arrivals to Za'atari believed their stay would be temporary: 'We thought, like the Palestinians, that we'd stay here for a short time and then go back. We didn't expect to stay here for this long', a female refugee said.

Much progress has been made: the camp has 32 schools, eight health facilities, and water and electricity supplies. Yet camp life is still challenging. Families do not have enough space, food or water, and electricity is only available for up to 10 hours daily. Mothers described the myriad ways this affects family life. During night-time power cuts, some children are afraid of the dark and others have suffered burns and other injuries. In cramped caravans, families often share a single room. Some girls leave school and opt for early marriage, partly due to financial struggles and the lack of other prospects, but also in pursuit of privacy. 'Despite not knowing the responsibility that will fall on her, the girl chooses marriage to have her own room', a female refugee said, adding that such marriages often ended in divorce.

The camp began as an emergency solution but has evolved into a quagmire with its own bureaucracy and grinding routine. Mostly, refugees described a static life, waiting in a halfway realm with no end in sight; 43% of the camp's residents report depression.⁹ 'There is nothing new in this life', one man said. 'If I go to see my neighbour, I hear the same thing; if I go to see a friend, I hear the same complaint ... I'm 36 years old, but looking at my face you'd think I'm older, and this is due to the life we have.'

STALLED AMBITION AND SUSPENDED FUTURES

Za'atari refugee camp has a young population: 20,000 babies have been born in the camp and more than half the residents are children.¹⁰ In focus

We left a detached house. We left our cars, education, jobs, water and electricity. We were used to a certain way of life before abandoning it to start over in the desert.

Female Syrian refugee, Za'atari refugee camp

We don't feel that we have a future.

Girl, 15, Za'atari refugee camp

group discussions, many young Syrians described a sense of despair about their future and saw few opportunities ahead.

There has been great progress in Za'atari in increasing school enrolment, and most children between 6 and 15 years old attend school, although enrolment drops to 60% among 16-year-old young people.¹¹ However, young Syrians and parents worry about the quality of education in the camp, with children saying teachers were disinterested and sometimes bullied them. One teenage boy, who had dropped out of school, said: 'The teacher arrives and takes a seat. We ask him about something, and he doesn't answer. He's always on his phone. He used to say that whether we understood or not, he'd still get paid.' Teenage girls reiterated the same concerns: 'Some teachers come to class and don't teach anything. Sometimes they delegate teaching to students', one girl said.

Children and parents described resourceful ways they supported their children's education, despite the challenges. One girl, who aspires to be a computer scientist, said her father had built a small extension to their caravan to give her a quiet space to study, although it was too cold to use in winter. A father explained: 'If there is an educated person in the house, he'll help the children and make sure they continue their education ... My four daughters teach my son because he learns nothing in school.' Another father, who is illiterate, sent his son to a private tutor: 'Education is a failure in this camp. Some people, including myself, sell our food vouchers to pay for a private tutor for the kids.'

Many boys and girls felt unmotivated to study, perceiving that they had few prospects whatever their grades. Syrian students have to pay the same fees as international students to attend Jordanian universities, an unaffordable cost for most, while few scholarships are available. 'What good is it to finish high school and then have to stop because we don't have any money?', a teenage boy asked.

Most of the male Syrian children and teenagers in the focus group discussions had already dropped out of school, and all had worked in agriculture. One young refugee explained: 'Most of the boys here finish seventh or eighth grade and then drop out to work on farms. As if these farms were their secondary education. This is our existence'. Farms surrounding Za'atari are a key source of work for refugees in the camp; the work is irregular, seasonal and poorly paid, with daily wages of around JOD 6 (\$8.50). Another young refugee said his childhood ambition was to be a mechanical engineer, after working as a car mechanic during his school holidays in Syria, but that he no longer saw a future for himself beyond working in farms. 'There is no future. In 10 years, my hands will have nothing to do but this work. I will never go back to school.'

Among teenage boys and young men, all said they wanted to leave the camp but most could see no way out. 'The camp destroys our future. Life cannot be great here. We only work and then go home. And when our children ask what we did with our lives, we will only say that we worked on farms and at the camp.' Despite their own youth, the concerns of some young Syrians had already shifted to the next generation: 'If I stay here, [my

children] will live the same life as me ... I want them to be better than me, to have a good education', one young man said.



Haneen, 11, and Hala, 11, present a doll's house they created in Za'atari refugee camp, on 4 April 2019. Photo: Nesma Nsour/Oxfam.

BARRIERS TO WORK

When asked about their future ambitions during focus group discussions, Syrian girls responded with a range of vocations: pharmacist, doctor, translator, photographer. One teenager wanted to be a police officer; she'd observed the Jordanian police stationed at the camp entrance and admired their disciplined personalities. None of these professions are open to Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Jordan opened its labour market to Syrian refugees in 2016 as part of an innovative international deal, the Jordan Compact, that saw the kingdom awarded concessional financing and eased access to European markets in exchange for allowing Syrians to work. However, like other non-Jordanians, Syrians may only work in certain sectors, such as agriculture, manufacturing and construction; other professions are reserved for Jordanians, from clerical and mechanical jobs to hairdressing, teaching and engineering. These restrictions protect Jordanians in a labour market that is not producing enough jobs to meet national demand, but they also limit Syrian peoples' prospects. 'Syrians who hold degrees in medicine and law are now selling biscuits to children in schools', a male refugee in Za'atari said.

The Jordan Compact was extended to include refugees in Za'atari in 2017, allowing them to apply for permits to work legally outside the camp, but job opportunities are scarce and overwhelmingly informal. Za'atari camp is in Mafraq governorate, which has the highest unemployment rate in Jordan.¹² Most work permits issued in the camp have been for the agriculture sector.

Most problems in the camp are caused by a lack of job opportunities. We hope to be part of Jordanian society to find job opportunities for all of us, men and women, and to ease life's burdens.

Female refugee, Za'atari refugee camp

Notably, work permits do not necessarily correlate to formal jobs; most working refugees are engaged in informal work while some refugees have acquired work permits to help them move in and out of the camp more easily.¹³

There has been a sharp decline in the number of work permits issued in Za'atari in recent years. In 2018, 13,858 such permits were issued or renewed, but only 305 were issued or renewed in the first six months of 2022.¹⁴ In part, this is due to a requirement since 2021 that Syrian refugees pay monthly social security contributions of JOD 16 (\$22.50). This is unaffordable for many refugees, most of whom don't have regular work. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a lasting decline of 7 percentage points in employment for Za'atari residents, mirroring national trends; unemployment across Jordan reached unprecedented levels during the pandemic.¹⁵

With scarce job opportunities and limited access to local job markets, refugees in Za'atari rely on income opportunities provided by international organizations and UN agencies through humanitarian programmes, known as incentive-based volunteering (IBV) or cash-for-work. This is the main source of work in the camp; in 2021, 42% of working refugees were engaged in cash-for-work programmes, followed by agriculture (25%).¹⁶

Oxfam has provided cash-for-work opportunities in Za'atari since 2014. It is responsible for all solid waste management in Za'atari and runs recycling facilities to reduce the amount of waste sent to Jordanian landfills. Oxfam engages refugees in this work, providing income for refugees as well as injecting cash into the camp's economy and thereby indirectly supporting refugee-run businesses. Oxfam's waste collection and sorting operations are deliberately labour-intensive – for example, using manual trolleys to collect waste rather than trucks – to maximize the number of income-generating opportunities created. All the opportunities are short-term and only one person per household can be engaged in cash-for-work, to reach as many households as possible.

Cash-for-work programmes in Za'atari have been particularly successful in engaging women. In June 2022, one-third of the IBV positions in the camp were held by Syrian women, a far higher female participation than in the broader labour market; women constitute fewer than 15% of the Jordanian workforce.¹⁷ Women in Za'atari face additional barriers to working, including childcare responsibilities, poor transport options and restrictive gender norms. Initially, few women applied for roles in Oxfam's waste collection operations, but after community consultations and a series of adaptations to the roles, around half of these positions are filled by women, including technical and leadership roles.

Women refugees said they value these opportunities: 'Women's roles in the workplace were limited in Syria, but they can now work boldly ... I hope this support for women continues, not because of selfishness or prejudice, but because women are always vulnerable, and having organizations that support women gives them strength and independence', a female refugee said. Women also said they were keen for more training, particularly in

income-generating and entrepreneurial activities that they could do from home.

Previous Oxfam research has found that women engaged in cash-for-work have generally been able to overcome initial reluctance to their working, while most men were broadly supportive of women working in 'appropriate jobs'.¹⁸ The worsening economic situation presents an additional challenge: in focus group discussions, some male refugees objected to efforts to promote work for women while most men remained jobless. One man commented that women were working 'while the men sit in their homes'. Another male refugee felt the shifting gender norms were another loss in an uprooted community: 'We are lost, we need not lose any more', he said, calling on organizations that support women's employment to leave the camp. As has been seen historically, conflicts can rupture dominant notions of masculinity and femininity, as well socially assigned gender roles and the gendered division of labour.

Diminishing humanitarian funding has led to a decline in the number of cash-for-work opportunities available in Za'atari: from 7,000 opportunities in December 2017,¹⁹ to fewer than 2,800 in June 2022. This is a worrying development as cash-for-work provides a lifeline for refugees. It is the main source of income for one-fifth of the families in Za'atari,²⁰ and is vital for refugees who struggle to leave the camp for work, including women heads of households and people with disabilities. As one refugee noted: 'Let's talk about an old man, who can't leave the camp to work on farms, and has a big family at home. How will he support his family if he does not work in one of these organizations?'

In the absence of economic alternatives, it is critical that funding for cash-for-work is maintained, but refugees also need longer-term paths to economic self-reliance. Cash-for-work is not a sustainable solution, nor a substitute for jobs. The work is short-term and low paid,²¹ it cannot lift families out of poverty, and those engaged in cash-for-work are not protected under Jordanian labour law. In the longer term, Syrians refugees need greater inclusion into the Jordanian economy.

LIFE AFTER ZA'ATARI

For some refugees in Za'atari, the struggle to meet immediate needs is all-consuming and leaves little space to contemplate the future, but in focus group discussions nearly all refugees agreed they could not yet return to Syria. Likewise, a recent national survey found that 94% of Syrians in Jordan did not plan to return to Syria in the coming year.²² Peace in Syria remains elusive; ravaged by the 11-year conflict, the country faces a hunger crisis and is on the brink of economic collapse. For men who return, forced military conscription looms. 'There is no safety there yet. Whoever came here with a young son now has a young man, and we're afraid to send him back. Anyone with young daughters cannot return to Syria with them', a female refugee in Za'atari said. Between January and July 2022, just 1,440 refugees returned to Syria from Jordan.²³

Yes, we're refugees, but it has been 10 years, and we feel at home here and in this country. Nobody wants to go back to Syria as long as there is no security.

Female refugee, Za'atari refugee camp

Some refugees said they hoped for greater inclusion in Jordanian society. While Jordanians are overwhelmingly sympathetic towards refugees,²⁴ their integration is a politically sensitive issue; discourse around refugees in Jordan is shaped by the kingdom's long experience of hosting generations of Palestinian refugees, who have yet to return home after more than 70 years. This legacy plays a role in demarcating the political space for the socioeconomic integration of Syrian refugees, including their access to the labour market.²⁵

Among young refugees, resettlement outside Jordan is a common hope. A father shared his dilemma about letting his 17-year-old son leave: 'It's difficult to let my son be away from me, and this journey is fraught with danger ... but my son is extremely intelligent. He comes to me and tells me he can't stay here, that he can't get an education. I can't afford a private tutor for him. Before, I was opposed to him leaving, but now I'm not. I'm relying on God to protect him, and I'll let him go'.

Among older refugees, some said they didn't want to live in a different culture with a different language, while others were encouraged by stories of refugees who had left. Describing a friend who left Za'atari for Poland, one refugee said: 'We spoke with him yesterday, and he said it felt like he'd come from the darkness into the light. Even his face has changed; when he was here, he was too exhausted from working on farms. He said he lived in the camp with no dignity'. Another shared the story of a woman who left Za'atari seven years ago; her son had been illiterate when they left but in Canada he studied and became an assistant engineer. A female refugee said people were tired of living in a temporary state: 'People want to emigrate to feel settled, to live in a real home, to send their children to good schools and to own a car. We're not allowed to own a home or a car here. So, many refugees in the camp wish to be resettled'.

Grappling with rising poverty and growing debts, refugees worry what the future will bring to the camp, and fear dwindling humanitarian aid is a sign they will be abandoned. A refugee who is an imam in a mosque said: 'We're afraid that after 10 years, they'll tell us: "There's no money for food vouchers and no support available. Whoever wishes to return to his country may do so, and whoever can manage himself may do so." We're terrified this day will come'. Echoing this concern, another refugee said: 'Eventually, we'll be told that we must find a solution on our own. Funding will run out, and donor countries will stop sending aid. Where do we go from here?'

RECOMMENDATIONS

After 11 years of conflict, a political solution in Syria is urgently needed. This demands an inclusive, Syrian-led political process that is representative of all Syrians. In the meantime, the following recommendations are offered to ensure the immediate protection of Syrian refugees in Jordan as well as to support Jordan's economic recovery and growth to foster durable solutions for refugees.

INCREASE HUMANITARIAN FUNDING TO JORDAN TO FORESTALL A LOOMING CRISIS

After a protracted exile and a series of external shocks, Syrian refugees in Jordan are rapidly sliding further into poverty and debt. A humanitarian crisis looms as shrinking incomes and rising prices leave refugees unable to afford food and other basic needs. Refugees depend on humanitarian assistance, yet only 10% of Jordan's Humanitarian Response Plan for the Syria crisis is currently funded. The international community is facing global crises and escalating humanitarian needs in multiple contexts, but the needs of Syrian refugees must not be neglected and Jordan's stability must be maintained.

Donor countries should increase humanitarian funding to Jordan to mitigate the current crisis and support refugees and vulnerable Jordanians to meet their basic needs. This funding should be multiyear and flexible to enable predictable, sustainable and responsive assistance.

Implementing organizations including INGOS and UN agencies must ensure that humanitarian programming incorporates the perspectives of Syrian refugees. Refugees expressed a clear need for a review and increase in cash-for-work wages and food voucher assistance, both of which have remained stagnant despite rising living costs. Refugees also expressed a strong preference for food assistance in cash, rather than vouchers, so they can maximize its value by shopping in cheaper markets. Food vouchers can only be used in two shops, which refugees said were more expensive than other markets.

SUPPORT INCLUSIVE GROWTH IN JORDAN TO ENABLE DURABLE SOLUTIONS

The protracted exile of Syrian refugees calls for longer-term solutions to address refugees' needs and enable their self-reliance, while also supporting Jordan's resilience.

This requires donor countries and international financial institutions (IFIs) to foster Jordan's economic recovery and sustainable growth through investments and financing to support Jordan's Economic Modernisation Vision, a national roadmap to grow Jordan's economy and generate 1 million jobs in 10 years.

With financial support from donor countries and IFIs to unleash Jordan's full potential for growth, the Government of Jordan should explore ways to expand the economic inclusion of refugees so they too can reach their potential.

Donors, IFIs and the Government of Jordan should work to ensure that economic recovery and growth is inclusive, moving away from austerity policies, which have contributed to reductions in social spending while driving up poverty and wealth inequality.²⁶ Jordan should be supported to pursue ambitious redistributive policies to address deep, structural inequality. The two richest people in Jordan have more wealth than the

bottom 40% of Jordanian society, while 53 people have a combined wealth of \$9.5bn; their wealth has increased over the past five years, as the country has become poorer.²⁷ Jordan's current tax system disproportionately burdens people living in poverty, with the majority of tax revenue raised from indirect taxes that do not differentiate according to income levels.²⁸ Sales tax accounted for more than 70% of tax revenue in Jordan in 2020.²⁹

The Government of Jordan can use progressive taxation to redistribute power and wealth and reduce inequality. Higher levels of direct tax, such as income tax, would create a more just tax system. In addition, an annual wealth tax in Jordan would raise \$510m a year, with rates at 2% on wealth over \$5m, 3% on wealth over \$50m and 5% on wealth over \$1bn.³⁰ This would be enough to increase the government's health budget by 29% or reduce households' out-of-pocket health expenditure in half.³¹

The Jordan Compact demonstrated the potential of innovative development-led refugee financing to prise open policy and regulatory space. All stakeholders should draw lessons from this experience to ensure any future compact or financing modality focuses on job creation, beyond work permits, and considers the specific needs of Syrian women and men as well as the unique structure and attributes of the Jordanian labour market.

The Jordan Compact aimed to expand exports to Europe for Jordanian firms hiring Syrian refugees, but Jordanian manufacturers have struggled to take advantage of this. European countries could support Jordan to benefit from favourable access to European markets by providing technical assistance and marketing support to Jordanian manufacturers, and by facilitating trade missions. USAID-led programmes supporting the export capacities of Jordanian enterprises have demonstrated the potential of this approach.³²

EXPAND RESETTLEMENT PATHWAYS

Protection and support for refugees is a global responsibility. More equitable sharing of this responsibility requires high-income countries to go beyond providing financing to host countries; they must also take their share of refugees through resettlement pathways. While many refugees express a desire to resettle in third countries, only 2,800 Syrian refugees have been formally resettled from Jordan in the first six months of 2022.³³ With the Ukraine crisis, Europe has demonstrated its capacity to provide protection to refugees; Syrian and other refugees must be afforded the same protection. The right to refuge is universal and should not be selectively granted.

Oxfam asks that higher-income countries should collectively resettle 10% of the Syrian refugee population. Over the past decade, less than 3% of Syrian refugees have been resettled outside the Middle East.³⁴

NOTES

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¹² Roya News. (2022, 20 June). *Which Governorate has the Highest Unemployment Rate in Jordan?* Retrieved 21 July 2022, from <https://en.royanews.tv/news/36173/2022-06-20>

¹³ Aside from a period during the pandemic, work permits allow refugees to move more freely in and out of the camp. Otherwise, refugees need to apply to the authorities for exit permits to leave the camp.

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¹⁹ Ibid.

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²¹ Remuneration for IBV positions in Za'atari camp is consistent across all agencies at between JOD 1 to JOD 2.5 per hour (\$1.41 – \$3.53), depending on skill level, and has remained unchanged since 2015.

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²⁷ Estimates developed by Patriotic Millionaires, Institute for Policy Studies, Fight Inequality Alliance and Oxfam, using data from Forbes and WealthX.

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³⁴ Ibid.

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