

Social Networks and Support Strategies of Syrian Forced Migrants in Urban Jordan
Preliminary Findings – August 2014

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These findings are based on 15 formal, structured household interviews with Syrian families in Irbid and surrounding villages, 6 interviews with NGOs operating in Irbid, and through unstructured interviews with Syrians and Jordanians. Respondents were located by various methods; none are recent CARE beneficiaries.

INFORMATION/COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES:

1. Syrians do not seem to understand how UNHCR or other NGOs determine who gets support.

Families insist that decisions are not explained to them.

- Because of this misunderstanding, there is **suspicion among Syrian families that the process is corrupt**, or based on favouritism (wasta). This is damaging agencies' reputations.
- Many complaints are **specifically directed towards UNHCR**; perhaps this should be mentioned at coordination meetings?

2. Relying on word of mouth for communication means that families are not aware of what services are available to them.

- Groups of families tell each other about one or two agencies, and contact the same groups. **Most families are not aware of most NGOs operating.**
- Families have indicated a **reluctance to communicate to others about an NGO** they are made aware of, because they are afraid the funding will be reduced if too many families apply.
- Further, **after one or two rejections, families “give up”** and stop contacting agencies for support without realizing that different agencies target different groups.

3. People frequently complain that the phone lines to arrange an assessment with NGOS are always busy.

- While this issue **seems to have been addressed** by some agencies, people have already stopped trying and **the reputation persists.**
- More direct **outreach** could counter this trend in opinion. Families seem eager to “try again” when told of agencies with improved phone communications or in-office reception.

4. Many Jordanians grossly overestimate the assistance that Syrian families receive. Perceptions tend to be based on anecdotes and word of mouth.

- Some Jordanians perceive the selling of UNHCR food vouchers to mean that Syrian families are given more than enough, rather than acting out of desperation.
- Stories of families receiving sums of 600-1000JD monthly are common. These rumours are incredibly persistent and highlight the importance of coordination between agencies, as even **very few cases of poorly administered cash support can result in extensive scapegoating** of Syrians.

CONCLUSION: It would be helpful to find some way to mass communicate to both Syrians and Jordanians about the realities of the situation (not everybody is getting assistance, assistance is insufficient for the vast majority of families, families work or sell coupons out of desperation, how

assessments target the most vulnerable, things like this). Suggestions include radio or television spots, newspaper articles, or other public advertisements. Many agencies have skilled communications teams, but they tend to focus only outward towards donor states. The misinformation which is filling the vacuum of formal agency communications is leading to strong negative social effects.

FINANCIAL SITUATION:

1. Many families have received one time emergency cash grants from multiple organizations over a year ago, but are still in vulnerable situations and now **feel they have exhausted their options**.
 - They continue to be **vulnerable to financial shocks (especially job loss due to police raids)** but feel they are running out of places to turn.
2. Families in the best situations are surviving on **remittances**, mostly from the Gulf. Also sometimes from Syria.
 - Have not met any people getting money from further abroad.
 - Remittances **do not seem to be shared beyond immediate family**.
3. **Savings are mostly depleted**. A well-equipped home does not seem to indicate a stable situation.
 - many of families came wealthy and relied on savings, which are now drying up—previous situation in Syria does not indicate a sustainable situation here
4. Families are **terrified of deportation to Syria** as punishment for working illegally.
 - Many families have had family members deported. **The risk of deportation of income-earners is the greatest vulnerability** to the majority of households I have encountered. Because of this, **no financial situation can be considered lasting or stable**; at any point, households' sources of income may be deprived.
 - However, with no other sustainable option for support, sons often take on the risk.
 - When deportation does occur, families cycle through sons. When sons are gone, female households are exceptionally vulnerable.
5. Most families I have spoken to **left Zaatari unofficially**. This leads to many disadvantages.
 - Rumours are that health care and education for these families will be extremely restricted in the coming months.
6. People are **selling their UNHCR food coupons**, buying just bread, and paying the rent with the difference.
 - While we are aware of this, it is exceptionally common.
 - People of all economic backgrounds have reported selling food coupons regularly or semi-regularly, as it is **the only reliable way people can respond to unexpected financial problems (shocks)**.
7. There is **massive economic stratification** between Syrian families.
 - This seems to be tied directly to work opportunities.
 - Previous situations in Syria seems to be a poor predictor of situation in Jordan. Much more important is the presence of sons and younger fathers who are willing and able to take on the risk of work.
 - Older men (approx 45+) seem reluctant to take job opportunities available.
 - However, UNHCR's monthly support systems do seem to target the most vulnerable.
 - Paid "volunteer" contracts with agencies are a major lifeline for those lucky enough to secure them.
 - Agencies should emphasize the rotational hiring of Syrian volunteers as a way to inject cash into

family and friendship networks.

8. Families, villages, and tribes support each other, but not much as there is now a general lack of resources.

-Earlier in the conflict, these networks were major sources of support, but now support seems based on close family units.

-Support now is not financial, ie, when newcomers first arrive they are given shelter and food until they register with UNHCR.

CONCLUSION: Informal support networks are strained to the breaking point and can not be relied upon to contribute to sustainable household support in their current form. Rebuilding atrophied social networks may be possible through increased emphasis on psychosocial programming, but the lack of secure financial resources throughout the Syrian population means that friends and family may not present a strong resource for backup support.

While they are appreciated, **one-time emergency cash transfers do not contribute to a sustainable strategy** over the period of displacement. New approaches should be considered, to the extent that this is possible. NGOs and UNHCR should continue to advocate for permission to engage in more sustainable approaches (ie, livelihoods), to the extent that this is possible. Similarly, if possible, advocacy work against deportations should be undertaken.

While these subjects are inherently political, **the current legal configuration is exceptionally illogical**. The vast majority of Syrians in Irbid **cannot continue to reside here without securing irregular employment, as no other sustainable options are available**. Yet the risk of summary deportation for work without a permit means that the vast majority of Syrian families are in incredibly vulnerable situations. **NGOs and UNHCR implicitly support this arrangement by denying monthly assistance to families with men of working age**, thereby forcing families into vulnerable positions. A more sustainable balance could be arranged which reflects both the concerns of the Government of Jordan and reduces the vulnerability of Syrian families.

A possible avenue to consider is more interaction with the municipal government and Irbid governate.

SOCIAL SITUATION:

1. Isolation is common. Many of people—**especially women**—simply don't go outside.

-While we are aware of this, **loneliness and boredom are among the most common difficulties** people mention.

-It is **not clear why people do not visit family more often**. People talk about the cost of transit, but I suspect there is an unaddressed psychological reason for this as well.

-Existing psychosocial programs are a good start, but not large enough to meet the needs of such large numbers. Psychosocial programming should include “training” or **encouragement for Syrians to establish similar social groups outside of the NGO offices**.

-**More outreach** would be helpful in accessing people who otherwise do not present themselves. Many families express “shyness” in calling or visiting agencies, but were grateful for our visits.

2. Families are desperate to regain a sense of “future”.

-With no access to education or investments, and no clear end in sight to the conflict in Syria, **people are forced to “live only for today”**. The psychological effects of this are very heavy, especially among young men who have no opportunity for marriage, education, or career advancement.

-**Many are afraid they will not be able to return**, as the Syrian Government seems to be gaining

the upper hand in the conflict.

-This research has identified little-to-no programming from any agency which effectively addresses this challenge, although it should be acknowledged that identification of such programming is a secondary goal of the project.

3. Because of this, a startling number of families have sons who have departed for North Africa, intending to take boats Europe.

-This is a more common livelihood approach than expected.

-Families know the risks well, but are desperate to find ways to restart their lives and see onward migration as the final option.

-Other families are considering relocating to Lebanon or Turkey, but seem less aware of the risks of these choices.

5. Many are considering return to Syria.

-**Expectations that the Assad regime will win** the civil war seem to be rising. The conflict increasingly viewed as one between SAA and Islamic rebel groups, with the belief that Islamic groups will not be allowed to win.

-Some families report **plans to return as soon as the situation is safe enough**; some have family members who have returned already.

-Families with members more closely **associated with the FSA do not believe they will ever be able to return** to Syria.

-Given the challenges in sampling urban refugee populations, and the heterogenous nature of displaced Syrians here, it is extremely difficult to estimate how many Syrians would return given an Assad victory.

4. Despite the hardships, people are very, very thankful that they are not in the camps.

-Family heads often **express thankfulness that the Government of Jordan allows them to live in cities**. This treatment of Syrians is excellent for the state's local reputation.

-Conversely, since all Syrians crossing the border are now sent to Azraq, people can no longer leave to visit family (in Syria or elsewhere), which is having a very strong negative psychological effect on some people.

-Many **wish to bring family members trapped in Syria**, but will not do so if it means making the long trip through Mafraq region and going to camps.

-Many state they **would rather risk return to Syria** than living in the camps.

CONCLUSION: More community involvement in psychosocial programming may help here, such as encouraging women to start their own social groups. **Language exchanges and other knowledge-shares** may be helpful. Many Syrians report pursuing free online university courses, for example. Encouraging **community “projects” that involve medium-term goal-setting** would be beneficial. Again, these *do not* have to take a form that would “encourage integration”.

However, the only solution to the social challenges facing Syrians in urban Jordan can come from a shift in the political situation (related to financial challenges, above). Emphasizing the inherent unsustainability of the present climate may be a useful form of leverage in dealing with the Government of Jordan.

Emphasis on the human desire to secure a “future” may be helpful; this is a psychological impression and does not have to involve employment.

Highlighting **the connection between irregular migration to Europe and lack of “future” in countries of first asylum** may provide a pragmatic opportunity to **increase international pressure** in the establishment of more emotionally sustainable programming.