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The "Arab Spring" and Refugees in the Middle East

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The potential impact of refugees on economic, security, and political stability is a familiar challenge in the Middle East. Past wars in the region have led hundreds of thousands of people to migrate and in many cases to remain as permanent residents in their new locations, which in turn affects the political and demographic balance of the host countries. So too, the events of recent years in Syria, Libya, and Yemen have prompted waves of refugees that are likely to threaten the internal stability of countries that have thus far managed to survive the regional political shocks in (relative) equanimity.

About one third of Syria's citizens have lost their homes, and over two million have found refuge in neighboring countries (of these, half are under 18 years old). The rest of the displaced population (estimated at six million) is still in Syria. It is difficult to verify the numbers, but the trend is clear. Approximately 700,000 Syrian refugees are in Turkey, about 200,000 of them in refugee camps near the border, and it was reported recently that the Turkish government has begun to construct a fence along the border in order to prevent the arrival of more refugees. A quarter of a million Syrians, mostly Kurds, have fled to Iraq, a country that itself suffers from chronic political and security instability. Egypt is host to about 125,000 Syrian refugees, in addition to tens of thousands of refugees from Libya and Sudan

Elsewhere in the region, both Libya (from which over one million refugees have fled) and Yemen suffer from the problem of refugees and displaced people following the instability accompanying the downfall of their former rulers, Qaddafi and Saleh. Yet while Libya and Yemen are struggling with the economic and social burden of the phenomenon, in Jordan and Lebanon the refugees are altering the demographic balance, and pose a potential threat to these states' social and political order.

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To date Jordan has absorbed some 600,000 Syrian refugees, and a similar number of Syrians who are not classified as refugees (a total of 1.2 million). This group joins the Iraqi (Sunni) refugees who came to Jordan following the fall of Saddam Hussein and are still living in Jordan. Thirty thousand Iraqi refugees in Jordan are supported by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), but apparently many others arrived in Jordan with means and still live there.

The flow of refugees has imposed a heavy burden on the Jordanian economy. The monarchy has managed to survive the wave of protests that followed the rise in fuel prices and cuts in government subsidies for basic commodities, thanks to political reforms spearheaded by the king and external aid from the International Monetary Fund, the US, and the Gulf states. Indeed, the Gulf states transferred generous aid to Jordan in return for its allowing weapons shipments to the Syrian rebels through its territory. The protests in Jordan ebbed in 2013, but the stream of refugees from Syria has grown. Approximately 150,000 people now live in the Zaatari refugee camp, which has become the fourth largest city in Jordan, and are supported by the UN and various international organizations (including Israeli organizations). The rest of the refugees, however, have been dispersed among Amman and other cities, and are flooding the Jordanian labor market and causing a rise in the prices of basic commodities. As long as the fighting continues in Syria, refugees will continue to flee to Jordan, and displaced people are liable to cross the border to Jordan and other countries at one stage or another. In the long term, the Jordanian economy will be unable to contain the stream of refugees. Possibly as a way of pressuring the international community to give his kingdom more aid, the Jordanian king declared in November 2013 that if Jordan does not receive substantial aid from the international community, it will "take measures" to preserve its interests.

Beyond the economic aspect, the Syrian refugees might change the demographic balance in the kingdom. The Palestinians have in effect lost their undeclared status as the majority in the country. At the same time, the trans-Jordanian portion of the population, which is loyal to the monarchy and comprises the governmental and military elite, is also shrinking. Furthermore, the refugees that remain in Jordan stand to arouse political unrest or to take part in future protests in the kingdom, especially if they contain Islamist elements averse to monarchial rule. Together with protests that have already begun among the refugees, mainly as a result of the humanitarian and employment situations, concern exists that jihad groups will infiltrate with the refugees and are liable to vent their rage at the monarchy, or alternatively, to harm Israeli and Western interests.

Lebanon has absorbed the largest number of Syrian refugees. Its geographic proximity to the large population centers in Syria, the special relations between the two countries, and the fact that many Syrians lived in Lebanon even before the outbreak of the civil war have made Lebanon the principal destination of Syrian refugees. Over 800,000 Syrians are already registered with the UN Refugee Agency in Lebanon, and Lebanese government sources estimate that there are over a million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, constituting about one quarter of the country's population. Lebanon regards the Syrian civil war, especially the refugee problem, as no less than an existential threat. The war in Syria has aggravated the sectarian tensions in Lebanon, and sectarian violence is on the rise. The flow of refugees caused a 30 percent surge in crime over the past year, and the government is increasingly hard pressed to supply the population with electricity and water.

Unlike in Jordan and Turkey, governmental ineptitude – as well as opposition from Hizbollah – has thus far kept Lebanon from building permanent camps for the Syrian refugees. It is feared, particularly by Hizbollah, that refugee camps will become permanent abodes, encouraging the Syrian refugees to remain, and become a center for Syrian opposition groups that will make them a base of operations against the Assad regime and Hizbollah itself. In contrast to the situation in Jordan and Turkey, the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are spread according to their ethnic distribution throughout hundreds of communities and villages, and in improvised refugee camps, mostly in the border area. If they remain in the country, they are liable to dramatically alter the demographic ethnic balance in Lebanon.

No end to the civil war in Syria is in sight, and it is believed that hundreds of thousands of Syrians, mostly Sunnis, will settle in Lebanon even after the crisis ends, due to the expected difficulty reconstruction process. The Syrian refugees are not eligible to vote in Lebanon and therefore do not affect the electoral balance, but the current situation in Lebanon is shaped more in the street than in parliament. A dramatic change in the demographic balance in Lebanon in favor of the Sunnis is liable to have a negative impact on the standing of the Christians, and in the long term, is also likely to undermine the status of Hizbollah. The presence of many of the refugees in the Beqaa region, a predominantly Shiite region with part effectively controlled by Hizbollah, is likely to arouse sectarian conflict and also to undermine the status of Hizbollah in the region, especially since most of the Syrian refugees support the opposition to Assad and regard Hizbollah as responsible for their plight.

It is difficult for Jordan and Lebanon to cope with the tidal wave of refugees. Public services ranging from health and education to public order and the regular supply of water are in danger of collapse. The wave of refugees also affects the economic situation by increasing unemployment and poverty in these countries, which is liable to make various groups in the population more radical, for example the Palestinians, whose jobs are often usurped by Syrian refugees. In addition to the possible danger to the Hashemite monarchy, instability is in itself dangerous, and is liable to create areas beyond the government’s control and in which terrorist organizations enjoying external financing become able to fill the socioeconomic vacuum in failed states and can operate, including against Israel.