

HIS 254:

COVID-19's Economic and Social Exacerbation on the Syrian Refugee

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Introduction:

In 2022, there were about 2.97 million refugees from Syria who entered 110 asylum countries.¹ Over 800,000 of these people fled to Lebanon, while about 1.1 million fled to Jordan and Germany.² This Syrian conflict has lasted for a decade, nearing half a million deaths and the displacement of 14 million people in total.³ Following the recent emergence of COVID-19, Syria has a great risk of both an ISIS resurgence and the exacerbation of the country's existing health, economic, political, and security crises. As of February 1, 2024, the U.S. has agreed to attack Iran-linked targets in Iraq and Syria as retaliation for the killing of three U.S. soldiers.⁴ With the ongoing conflicts and the perpetuation of violent attacks, no near sight of peace lies ahead for the Syrian population. As a result, the Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, remains the largest refugee crisis in the world.

The emergence of COVID-19 in Syria placed a strain on the crisis within the country, affecting the entire population and setting up the small country for a destitute future. As a result of COVID-19, the state of Syria's refugee crisis exponentially worsened due to economic downturns of neighboring countries, global economic restrictions on Syria, and the effect of the COVID-19 contagion on refugee sites and host communities. These effects led to the deterioration of labor conditions and economic resources in neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, poor health and medicinal accessibility for Syrian refugees and camp sites, and the overall deterioration of Syrian refugees' quality of life. Refugees in camps in countries like Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq all felt the repercussions of the pandemic. They were faced with poorer living conditions than before, worsening the state of the crisis.

COVID-19 and Syria:

¹ Ekene Ijeoma. "The Refugee Project." Accessed April 21, 2024. <https://therefugeeproject.org>.

² Ekene Ijeoma. "The Refugee Project."

³ "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," *UNHCR* online, March 13, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>.

⁴ Joseph Clark, "U.S Strikes Targets In Iraq and Syria in Response to Deadly Drone Attack," last modified February 2, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3665734/us-strikes-targets-in-iraq-and-syria-in-response-to-deadly-drone-attack/>.

On March 20, 2020, the WHO proclaimed the coronavirus a pandemic, posing a significant epidemiological threat.⁵ With COVID-19 affecting major economies like the U.S., it followed that smaller, less developed, and more conflict-prone countries would suffer greatly. As a result, over half of Syria's population has become refugees since the conflicts (both preexisting Syrian conflicts and COVID-19) began, and over six million people have been internally displaced.⁶ Researchers estimated that by 2021 nearly 90% of Syrians would be impoverished, with basic needs such as food, shelter, and water being placed above medical treatment, and larger rates of exploitation potentially placing Syrian youth as permanently underclass.⁷ Those conditions have progressively deteriorated over the past three years.

The Syrian government and depleted health system were placed under strain by the pandemic. They were further exacerbated by the presence of poverty, illiteracy, and violence. In 2022, Syria's healthcare was in the worst situation ever recorded due to COVID-19's effect.⁸ More than half the country's hospitals were closed, more than half of health professionals fled, and international sanctions were aimed at the Syrian economy.⁹

Furthermore, the influence of COVID-19 on Syria's state was multifaceted, not only affecting the healthcare systems but also economic and political conditions. Limitations to individual freedoms and human rights violations were seen in the workforce, additionally, the lack of Syrian political stability caused further turmoil during COVID-19.¹⁰

Because of these effects, Syrian refugees were placed under immense stress with few solutions. They suffered economically, with restrictions on small businesses, the collapse of

⁵ Sarya, Swed et al. "Syria: A Conflict-Torn Country and the COVID-19 Conundrum." *International Journal of Surgery* Publish Ahead of Print (March 27, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.1097/JS9.000000000000118>.

⁶ Swed et al. "Syria: A Conflict-Torn Country and the COVID-19 Conundrum."

⁷ Swed et al. "Syria: A Conflict-Torn Country and the COVID-19 Conundrum."

⁸ Swed et al. "Syria: A Conflict-Torn Country and the COVID-19 Conundrum."

⁹ Swed et al. "Syria: A Conflict-Torn Country and the COVID-19 Conundrum."

¹⁰ Swed et al. "Syria: A Conflict-Torn Country and the COVID-19 Conundrum."

nearby countries' economies, and the exploitation and deterioration of labor conditions. The health of Syrian refugees significantly declined because of the lack of medical testing and vaccines available to refugees, the easy spread of COVID-19 in the refugee sites, and poor living conditions. Additionally, the continued state of Syria's political instability consistently placed Syrian refugees in hazardous conditions and situations. These factors combined led to the pandemic's significant impact on Syrian refugees.

COVID-19's Economic Effects on Syrian Refugees:

Before COVID-19, Syria's economic status declined as a result of a decade-long war. Targeted attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including markets, hospitals, schools, and rural and urban areas led to an estimated total of over 400,000 civilians killed and half of the pre-war population displaced.¹¹ According to the World Bank, the Syrian economy has shrunk by more than 60 percent since 2010, with an almost 300 percent inflation rate increase on consumer goods by January 2021 since pre-war dates.¹² These catastrophic effects were seen due to Syrian corruption and malpractice, but also due to the inner workings and intertwined economies of Syria, Lebanon, and other neighboring countries. The effects of COVID-19 accelerated the downturn of Syria's economy because they affected neighboring countries' economies, the Syrian workforce, and humanitarian aid.¹³

Syrian refugees have spread throughout the Middle East, with more than 5.5 million finding asylum in countries between Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and Iraq alone.¹⁴ Consequently, the status of these countries and their own economies effectively held power over the quality of Syrian refugeehood. For example, in Jordan the government implemented drastic

¹¹ Barrett Alexander, and Ahlam*. "Syria's Economic Collapse and Its Impact on the Most Vulnerable," February 18, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/syrias-economic-collapse-and-its-impact-most-vulnerable>.

¹² Barrett Alexander, and Ahlam*. "Syria's Economic Collapse and Its Impact on the Most Vulnerable."

¹³ Barrett Alexander, and Ahlam*. "Syria's Economic Collapse and Its Impact on the Most Vulnerable."

¹⁴ Marwan S, Hajjar, and Ghassan S. Abu-Sittah, "The Multidimensional Burden of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon." *Journal of Global Health* 11 (2021): 05003. <https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.11.05003>.

measures to eliminate COVID-19 that held serious effects on the country's population and the Syrian refugees hosted.¹⁵ Jordan, which relied on international relations, faced the potential loss of foreign aid due to other countries restricting their budgets.¹⁶ With donor fatigue and international investment substantially decreasing, Syrian refugees in Jordan were faced with the potential of having to retreat to Syria or flee the country.¹⁷ The intense effects of COVID-19 on hosting countries threatened Syrian refugeehood and status, with host countries barely providing reliable electricity and internet for the thousands residing in host camps.¹⁸ Jordan is an example of how the effects of COVID-19 on Syria's neighboring countries directly shifted the status and livelihood of Syrian refugees, as most Middle Eastern countries mirrored these conditions.

As mentioned before, one of the most prominent economic catastrophes for Syrian refugees caused by COVID-19 was the deterioration of employment and wages. For Syrian refugees and other vulnerable populations, the economic downfall caused by COVID-19 worsened living conditions and the status of refugee families. During the pandemic, out of 129 families surveyed, 79% of the breadwinners in Syrian refugee families settled in Lebanon lost their jobs, and of those who kept their jobs 68% experienced wage reduction.¹⁹ Only 55% of the families could "partially" afford basic needs, with the other 45% unable to afford them at all.²⁰ It is evident that Syrian refugees in the Middle East experienced increased desperation and need for

¹⁵ Maha Kattaa, and Tweodros A. Kebede, Svein E. Stave. "Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan and Lebanon." International Labour Organization (2020). https://webapps.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/arabstates/robeirut/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749356.pdf

¹⁶ Maha Kattaa, and Tweodros A. Kebede, Svein E. Stave. "Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan and Lebanon."

¹⁷ Maha Kattaa, and Tweodros A. Kebede, Svein E. Stave. "Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan and Lebanon."

¹⁸ Maha Kattaa, and Tweodros A. Kebede, Svein E. Stave. "Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan and Lebanon."

¹⁹ Marwan S, Hajjar, and Ghassan S. Abu-Sittah, "The Multidimensional Burden of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon."

²⁰ Marwan S, Hajjar, and Ghassan S. Abu-Sittah, "The Multidimensional Burden of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon."

humanitarian support as a result of COVID-19. During the pandemic, the number of vulnerable Syrian refugees surged drastically.²¹ These effects continued even following COVID-19 restrictions. Refugees in Jordan confirmed that only 35% of the population were able to secure job returns after the lifting.²²

One of the foundational catalysts for the steep economic decline and deteriorating Syrian refugee livelihood involved the status of humanitarian aid or lack thereof. As a result of the immediate emergency and increased need, many humanitarian efforts fell short. In Jordan, for example, only 17,000 out of 49,000 newly identified vulnerable families received emergency cash support, with an estimate of over 80% of Syrians living below the poverty line.²³ The status of Syrian refugee families decreased even more since 30% of them did not receive support from organizations during the pandemic due to the effects of the crisis on these organizations.²⁴ Without the needed humanitarian aid and funds, these countries, and consequently Syrian refugees, were unable to sustain themselves during this time and faced a steep decline in their quality of life. Overall, COVID-19's economic effects on the Syrian refugee populations were catastrophic for these populations and resulted in an even more significant increase in poverty.

COVID-19's Health Effects on Syrian Refugees:

COVID-19's restrictions and constraints heavily affected the health status of Syrian refugees. As a result of the spread of COVID-19, governments in countries such as Jordan limited movement in and out of refugee camps, attempting to combat the spread of the virus.²⁵ Additionally, with the restriction of movement, refugee camps for Syrians also faced other issues

²¹ Andrej, Mahecic. "Syrian Refugees Profoundly Hit by COVID-19 Economic Downturn." UNHCR US, June 16, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/briefing-notes/syrian-refugees-profoundly-hit-covid-19-economic-downturn>.

²² Marwan S, Hajjar, and Ghassan S. Abu-Sittah, "The Multidimensional Burden of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon."

²³ Andrej, Mahecic. "Syrian Refugees Profoundly Hit by COVID-19 Economic Downturn."

²⁴ Marwan S, Hajjar, and Ghassan S. Abu-Sittah, "The Multidimensional Burden of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon."

²⁵ Andrej, Mahecic. "Syrian Refugees Profoundly Hit by COVID-19 Economic Downturn."

as well, such as a lack of fulfillment of basic needs, understanding of the situation, and available hospitals and medical care. Exposure to COVID-19 was high due to the dire living conditions, placing the health of Syrian refugees at risk.

One of the biggest effects of COVID-19 on Syrian refugee sites was the consequential crowding and need for resources. Due to limitations in movement, where countries would require no entry or exit beyond the host communities, many households did not have space to socially distance.²⁶ As a result, densely populated shelters increased the contact rate, those who were exposed but unable to properly quarantine put others at greater risk, and the overall lack of individual space led to greater risks of COVID-19.²⁷ The lack of space and ability to quarantine increased the probability of transmission substantially, and in addition to those factors Syrian refugees barely had access to preventative measures. Supplies such as masks were unavailable in refugee camps because of factors like low perceived risk, cost considerations, and low awareness of COVID-19.²⁸

Many Syrian refugee camps suffered during the pandemic not only from the crowding, but from the consequential need for sanitation and water. Inadequate access to clean water made it impossible for Syrian refugees to properly sanitize and wash themselves, putting them at high risk for COVID-19.²⁹ Barriers to basic needs and healthcare placed Syrian populations in Middle Eastern countries at higher risk. The lack of accessible healthcare due to cost, perceived low

²⁶ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, (2021): 1-6. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-021-00349-6>.
<https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/vulnerability-syrian-refugees-lebanon-covid-19/docview/2503018993/se-2>.

²⁷ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, 3

²⁸ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, 3

²⁹ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, 3

prioritization, and stigmatization consequently resulted in unmet healthcare needs.³⁰ In 2019, it was estimated that 13% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon had no access to primary healthcare, and 24% did not have access to secondary care.³¹ Without access to proper care, there was limited exposure to preliminary testing as well. Out of the 26,000 tests done in Lebanon by April 27, 2019, none of them were on Syrian refugees.³² As a result, Syrian refugees in Lebanon experienced a drastically increased risk for COVID-19, with other Middle Eastern countries such as Jordan mirroring the same conditions.

The issues regarding public health policies run deep within these countries, displaying the disparities and shaky foundations of their healthcare systems. In Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan particularly, the weaknesses of their healthcare systems were only amplified by COVID-19 and reflected in their vulnerable populations such as Syrian refugees. In Lebanon, the government announced free testing for coronavirus in the public Rafiq Hariri University Hospital in Beirut, yet never mentioned refugees' eligibility.³³ As a result, it was unlikely for Syrian refugees to obtain the necessary testing. Additionally, Syrian refugees would often experience forced deportations and harassment from local communities and general authorities, disincentivizing refugees from being honest about their health status due to the fear of deportation.³⁴ As mentioned previously, the threat of deportation restricted many Syrian refugee's opportunities both economically and regarding their health.

Conclusion:

³⁰ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, 4

³¹ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, 4

³² M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, 4

³³ Lina Khatib, "COVID-19 Impact on Refugees Is Also Political | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank," March 31, 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/03/covid-19-impact-refugees-also-political>.

³⁴ Lina Khatib, "COVID-19 Impact on Refugees Is Also Political | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank."

The effects of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees and their livelihoods exacerbated already dire conditions. While Syrian refugees had already experienced declining services and aid, the pandemic worsened these conditions both economic and politically, placing Syrian refugees under the constant threat of deportation and stripping them of their limited resources.

Economically, Syrian refugees suffered throughout the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic effectively deprived Syrian refugees of suitable wages, businesses, and jobs. This population suffered tremendously during this time, as the Syrian population in Jordan was threatened with deportation.³⁵ Additionally, refugees residing in Lebanon suffered wage reductions and could barely afford basic utilities.³⁶ About 80% of Syrian refugees fell below the poverty line, indicating a sharp increase of vulnerable families and needed aid.³⁷

As a result of the economic restrictions by the pandemic, humanitarian aid needed by Syrian refugees was not met by international powers. The consistent threats and limitations on foreign aid for countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and other Middle Eastern hosts left Syrian refugees with little available humanitarian aid and increased the desperation of this population. Consequently, basic needs and sanitation were challenging to obtain or maintain. These families had limited access to necessary factors such as space, clean water, medical supplies, and testing to combat COVID-19.³⁸

Another area that Syrian refugees experienced severe hardship in because of COVID-19 was the lack of accessibility of health care and necessary medical supplies. Hosted by many smaller Middle Eastern countries, Syrian refugees faced the instabilities of these countries'

³⁵ Maha Kattaa, and Tweodros A. Kebede, Svein E. Stave. "Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Jordan and Lebanon."

³⁶ The Multidimensional Burden of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon."

³⁷ Andrej, Mahecic. "Syrian Refugees Profoundly Hit by COVID-19 Economic Downturn."

³⁸ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." Conflict and Health 15, 4

healthcare systems even before the pandemic. As a result, when the pandemic struck many of these healthcare systems were unprepared for the extent of the contagion and the level of aid required. Syrian refugees were left with few resources. They lived in crowded shelters, experienced limitations on their movement, and couldn't implement proper sanitation due to the lack of consistent clean water and medical supplies such as masks or proper testing.³⁹

COVID-19 decreased the quality of life for Syrian refugees as a result of economic restrictions on both employment and humanitarian aid and the catastrophic impact it had on many smaller host countries' unprepared healthcare systems.

³⁹ M. Fouad, Fouad et al, "Vulnerability of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon to COVID-19: Quantitative Insights." *Conflict and Health* 15, 4

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