



UNHCR/David Azia

# IMPACT OF SEPARATION ON REFUGEE FAMILIES SYRIAN REFUGEES IN JORDAN

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to better understand how family separation is impacting the lives of Syrian refugees and learn their perspectives on future solutions. It is hoped that this report will be used to lessen barriers and reduce the toll that family separation takes on Syrian refugees in Jordan and other frontline countries. Moving forward, the intention is to undertake similar studies on the impact of family separation on Syrian refugees in other host, as well as resettlement, countries.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## UNHCR/COLUMBIA PARTNERSHIP

In order to increase the impact of academic contribution to humanitarian action, strategic cooperation is imperative. Therefore, the UNHCR MENA Director's Office in Amman and the Columbia Global Centers | Amman have entered a partnership - as the first example of strategic regional collaboration between academia and UNHCR MENA - to better respond to the needs of displaced persons, refugees and host communities. Regional collaboration between UNHCR and the Amman Center will enable sensitization of stakeholders, enhance advocacy, and strengthen refugee protection. This paper is the first step of an initiative to conduct a regional study of the effects of family separation on displaced people.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

The ongoing conflict in Syria, now entering its eighth year, has resulted in the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Nearly 6.5 million Syrians have become internally displaced, with an additional 5.6 million forced to leave their country to seek asylum. In the face of this displacement, greater attention is being given to complementary and alternative solutions such as reunification of separated family members. However, serious legal and procedural obstacles are obstructing the reunification of Syrian families across the Middle East and Europe.

This study outlines several ways in which family separation negatively impacts Syrian refugees in Jordan. These effects are significant, and include financial burdens, increased child labour, emotional distress, broken social networks, parenting challenges and changes to familial roles.

## MAIN THEMES

85 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in Jordan and analyzed to identify concepts central to understanding refugee experiences with family separation. The following are the five core themes that emerged:

**1. Family separation occurs at distinct times during displacement and exhibits a shared pattern across the sample. Key moments of separation included immediately before leaving Syria and after residing in Jordan for a substantial period of time.**

“We made the decision to leave. The house was destroyed. My parents-in-law told me to go and they will stay and will accept their fate. We went on the road and became hungry, everything happened to us on the road. But we arrived safely, thank God.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)

**2. Family separation has damaged or broken social connections and resulted in new and smaller networks, with less capacity to support one another. While all families expressed a combination of these challenges, families that were solely headed by women faced greater difficulty in several domains.**

“We’re not able to teach them respect... Our values, principles and traditions - the Syrian ones, the ones we are proud of [are] almost being buried for the reason that everyone is in different countries. For example, my children have forgotten their grandparents.... They have no such thing as uncles or aunts at all. They don’t have any idea what that means.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)

**3. The absence of key family members exacerbates financial burdens in Jordan, resulting in increased stress, child labour, debt accumulation, and strained relationships with host communities.**

“My children are responsible, they know the situation. We want to live and pay for the house. They never complain. The other boy [works at a] socks factory. His school refused to let him work. They said it’s either school or work. They told us the same thing last year. He left school this year because we needed money. He wants to return to school. He was so upset about leaving his school... I told him that I will go to work next year and let him go to school.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)

**4. Admission and family reunification policies are keeping Syrian families apart. Even when Syrian refugees keep abreast of frequently changing requirements, the costs of most reunification processes are unaffordable. Respondents noted expenses related to documentation [and transportation] as being out of reach.**

“Our papers are all in order. The delay is from them, not from us. The laws of the state itself. We only want them to permit family reunification, not for all the young men trying to enter... Everybody is trying. Many families here try to leave but are banned... The situation is very hard.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)

**5. Syrian refugee perceptions about durable solutions are greatly influenced by the location of family members. Indeed, the vast majority of Syrians interviewed in this study exuded a sense of stagnation as a result of being unable to reunify with separated family members or make concrete decisions about the future.**

“If there is a country to reunify me with my husband and my daughters, I will go for sure. I will not say no.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)

## CONCLUSION

Many countries are providing support to Syrian refugees in accordance with customary international law obligations, as well as humanitarian principles and a regional legacy of protection. However, the current political climate has decreased states' willingness to resettle or reunify separated refugee families. Reunification policies are also complex, frequently changing, limited to select familial relationships and out of reach for a substantial number of families. This study outlines critical ways in which family separation negatively impacts Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Responding to refugee crises is about saving lives, as well as helping those fleeing conflict thrive and contribute to the rebuilding of their future. Family reunification must be considered an essential component of complementary pathways, and obstacles preventing reunification need to be urgently addressed. Ensuring refugees' right to family unity and streamlining reunification procedures is critical to refugee inclusion and family protection.

# BACKGROUND

Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees has stated that, “Syria is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time...”<sup>1</sup> Many factors have contributed to this pronouncement, but the high death toll,<sup>2</sup> physical and economic devastation,<sup>3</sup> and extended duration of displacement endured during this protracted conflict have made this crisis particularly distressing. Now entering its eighth year, the conflict, has resulted in the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Nearly 6.5 million Syrians have become internally displaced, with an additional 5.6 million forced to leave their country to seek protection.<sup>4</sup> Neighbouring countries in MENA and Turkey have received the majority of refugees. Turkey currently hosts the largest number of refugees in the world, due to the Syrian crisis, and Lebanon and Jordan host the greatest numbers in proportion to their population size.<sup>5</sup> According to the Government, within Jordan, there are an estimated 1.26 million Syrians, of whom 654,582 are registered refugees with UNHCR.<sup>6</sup> The majority of Syrian refugees within Jordan reside in four governorates: Amman (27.5%), Mafrq (24.1%), Irbid (20.5%), and Zarqa (16.4%).<sup>7</sup> About 79% of registered refugees live outside of camps in rural, urban or semi-urban areas.<sup>8</sup> For many living in urban settings, financial constraints are a significant problem. It is estimated that two thirds of the urban-based Syrian refugees in Jordan live below the absolute poverty line.<sup>9-11</sup>

A wide variety of actors continue to play a significant role in developing and implementing policies that aim to improve the lives of refugees and host communities in Jordan. To address these needs, the Jordanian Government, led by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, developed the ‘Jordan Response Plan’ (JRP) which provides a three-year plan that aims to ensure that much needed humanitarian interventions, both critical and longer-term, are incorporated in the humanitarian response design, further strengthening local and national resilience capacities. This is in line with the ‘Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2018-2019’ (3RP) which emphasizes the important role national systems and local responders can play in humanitarian response. While the 3RP is a regional initiative, it continues to be a nationally led process that fully incorporates national response plans, including the JRP.

In Jordan, UNHCR coordinates the refugee response under the leadership of the Jordanian Government and with the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF), which highlights a collaborative effort among UN agencies, in addition to the donor community, international and national NGOs, community-based organizations, refugees and host communities. As in all refugee crises, UNHCR aims to find durable solutions for persons of concern: inclusion of refugees, voluntary repatriation under safe and dignified conditions, and resettlement to a third country. For most refugees, integration and safe return home are not feasible solutions. Less than 1% of the world’s refugees are resettled to third countries, leaving many refugees in host countries without prospects for the long term.<sup>12</sup> As a result, greater attention is being given to complementary pathways and alternative solutions such as reunification of separated family members.

In the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, adopted in September 2016, 193 States committed to expanding opportunities for solutions, including recognizing family reunification as a means to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration. The New York Declaration further articulates a commitment to consider flexible arrangements to assist family reunification, protect children who are separated from their families and identify those in need of family unity.

However, legal and procedural barriers have obstructed the reunification of nuclear refugee families across the Middle East and Europe. Several of the largest host countries of Syrian refugees are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and thus do not extend the right to reunification. Reunification is often dependent on residency status, presenting an opportunity for restriction by host countries via stringent criteria.<sup>13</sup> If individuals do not yet have full refugee status in Europe, their eligibility for family reunification will be limited or not granted. Where family reunification is available, lack of documentation to prove relationships, procedural and travel costs, language barriers, limited access to embassies and consulates, and time constraints are leading impediments for families.<sup>14,15</sup> In addition, the legal definition of family under domestic law may not match cultural definitions of family members, such as extended family and children over 18 who often remain emotionally or otherwise dependent on their parents and siblings. The frequency of reunification is currently unknown but likely low and

has left a significant portion of the Syrian refugee community in Jordan disconnected from family members. These policies, and their multiple changes, can present administrative, procedural and financial obstacles for family reunification. A lack of cohesive and comprehensive policies and procedures exacerbates a refugee crisis that is already one of the largest the world has ever known.<sup>16</sup>

Family separation is a significant social, emotional and financial burden for many refugees who have had to flee conflict.<sup>15</sup> It is estimated that nearly 36.5% of all registered Syrian refugees in Jordan are separated from a member of their family, with 2.65% and 6.87% of refugees with a separated family member in Europe and Gulf Cooperation Council Countries, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Given the importance of family within Syrian culture, separated refugees experience stress and worry related to separation, which has been associated with impaired capacity to find employment, providing further economic burden to separated families.<sup>18</sup> Family separation has long been associated with increased psychological distress and physical health challenges.<sup>19,20</sup> Conversely, studies have shown stark increases in refugee well-being and prospects upon family reunification.<sup>15,19</sup>

While there is a clear indication that separation can negatively influence refugee well-being, currently there is limited information on the impact of family separation on Syrian refugee families, specifically those residing in the MENA/Turkey region.<sup>a</sup> An additional study found that Syrian refugees living in Irbid, Jordan, for example, had experienced a collapse of their pre-existing social networks and were no longer turning to them for support.<sup>21</sup> However, gaps still exist in the literature around the impact of separation and collapsed networks on Syrian refugees in Jordan. Understanding the impact of family separation in the largest refugee crisis in the world is essential to the development of comprehensive interventions to address these exacerbated vulnerabilities.

This report presents results from a multi-method study conducted to investigate the social, emotional and economic impact of family separation on Syrian refugees living in Jordan. It reviews how separation has impacted family structure, roles and composition, decision-making, and refugee perceptions on future solutions. Moving forward, it is hoped that this report will be used to decrease barriers in similar situations across the globe.



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<sup>a</sup> MENA region includes Turkey in relation to Syrian refugees. For non-Syrian refugee issues, Turkey is under the mandate of UNHCR's European operations.

# RESEARCH METHODS

## Study design

A cross-sectional, multi-method study was conducted to explore the impact of family separation on Syrian refugees in Jordan. The study included a demographic analysis of the UNHCR database to gather basic information about separation in refugee families. A policy review was also conducted to capture reunification policies in the top 10 countries hosting Syrian refugees (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Iraq, Egypt, Hungary, Germany, Canada, and Sweden) and to understand what information about the process existed in the public domain. Finally, 85 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Syrian refugees identified through the UNHCR database. Research methods are described in greater detail in Appendix 1.

## RESULTS

### Overview

The study team conducted a demographic analysis of separated families as well as an analysis of the reunification policies of 10 countries. These initial analyses were undertaken to better understand the context of separation in the Middle East and to inform the development of the qualitative in-depth interview tool. Findings from these analyses are woven into the background and conclusion sections of this report, while the results section is solely focused on data collected through semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugee families in Jordan.

85 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in Jordan and identified concepts central to understanding refugee experiences with family separation. The following are the 5 core themes, offering nuanced explanations of the causes, mechanisms and effects of family separation on Syrian refugees.

1. Family separation occurs at distinct times during flight and exhibits a shared pattern across the sample
2. Social networks are broken, causing psychosocial difficulties and unintended consequences
3. Limited access to services presents hardships that are exacerbated by separation
4. Reunification policies and procedures are complex, expensive, opaque and fuel separation
5. Syrian refugee perceptions about solutions are greatly influenced by the location of family members

While there is no universally agreed upon definition of the “family,” UNHCR highlights that flight can lead to separation and loss of extended family members in close relationships of dependency. Family was not immediately defined in this study in order to allow participants to define family in the manner that was most suitable to their social and cultural context. Interviewers asked respondents about their families and allowed them to determine who met the criteria for being included. However, we recognized that policy debates about family reunification focus on nuclear family members and thus our sample of 85 families were split in half, with the first half inclusive of all types of separation (i.e., including adult siblings, elderly parents) and the second half of the sample focused solely on those with nuclear family separation (i.e., spouses, children under 18). The 5 core themes from these in-depth interviews are expanded upon in the following section.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics**

	N (%)
<b>Total</b>	85 (100%)
<b>Head of Household</b>	
<i>Dual Head</i>	38 (44.7%)
<i>Female-only</i>	32 (37.6%)
<i>Male-only</i>	15 (17.6%)
<b>Residential Setting</b>	
<i>Urban Setting</i>	68 (80%)
<i>Northern Region</i>	17 (20%)
<i>Central Region</i>	42 (49.4%)
<i>Southern Region</i>	9 (10.6%)
<i>Camp Setting</i>	17 (20%)
<i>Za’atari Camp</i>	13 (15.3%)
<i>Azraq Camp</i>	4 (4.7%)



## 1. Experience of separating from family members

Family separation occurred at distinct times during flight experiences. The majority of families in Jordan experiencing separation had a family member who remained in Syria and did not flee. Closed borders, missing official identification and being too frail for the journey were common reasons that family members remained in Syria. Additionally, several married women fled Syria with their children, even when their husbands chose not to leave, resulting in strained relationships and divorce. One participant explained,

*“When I came here [Jordan], my husband did not agree. He divorced me and I came with my children. I mean, after I got here, I got divorced and he remarried. He did not want to leave.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Separation also occurred after families arrived to Jordan, though it was rarely an immediate decision. This second point of separation was a result of poor living conditions in the host country, including limited employment opportunities and expensive housing and health services. Those who decided to separate at this point did so through both regular and irregular methods. Some refugees were resettled to Europe, Canada or the United States through formal processes, while others attempted to reunify with family in Europe through irregular, often dangerous travel methods. The decision to undertake irregular travel (i.e., boat to Europe) had numerous push factors (i.e., unemployment in the host country) and several pull factors (i.e., family members living abroad, better opportunities for children). One woman highlights a push factor,

*“He [my husband] did not stay in Jordan because he could not find a job. I mean, we suffered a lot. We are a family of [five]. It is [six] with my husband. He was an employee in \_\_\_\_\_. And they fired him later. So, we stayed a whole year with no work, and what would it do for us. The man was weary. He said ‘I will look for a country to live like everyone else. And hopefully I can bring you to me.’ He went there [to a European country] and we are still waiting.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Additionally, having family abroad and being unable to reunify (specifically with spouses, unaccompanied minors, adult children, siblings and elderly parents), was a strong pull factor and resulted in onward movement that risked the lives of those who chose to travel. One participant explained,

*“We were separated because of the war. My mother was here [in Jordan] with us... I told you, my nephew died in the shelling. My brother was extremely affected by that. Whenever a plane flies over, he starts to panic, scream and cry of fear for his daughters. He had a boy and three girls; the boy died in the shelling. Then he sold all that he owned in Syria and was smuggled...to Turkey. He then talked to my mother after not seeing her for three years because she was in Jordan...He called her and said: come here and travel with me. He was a psychological wreck. And my mother's heart bled for him. Then she said: I have to leave you; your brother needs me now more than you do... So, she left to Turkey. And they left in winter and their inflatable boat ruptured and water got inside, but God delivered them.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Decisions to travel irregularly were not only made to reunify with family members but were made in order to create the possibility of future reunification. Several teenage boys made dangerous travel decisions in hopes of moving to Europe and applying for reunification as an unaccompanied minor. Even when parents discouraged this behavior, male children under the age of 18 appeared to have been motivated by third country policies that unintentionally promoted risky travel among this age group. One parent explained,

*“One day I went to UNHCR to renew the card, they asked, ‘Where is your son?’ I told them he is in [a European country]. Can I go to him? They said, ‘No, he must apply.’ He applied and was rejected. They rejected him because he was 18 years old. People started sending their sons by sea with their fathers*

*to reunify the rest of the family there, this is the rule applied in [this European country].” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

Another parent conveyed a similar experience,

*“He [my son] travelled with his uncle to Turkey and from Turkey he went to Germany like most others do... From Turkey, he went on a boat, illegally and he made it to Germany... He told me it was very arduous and they were very afraid. He told me everyone on the boat with him was praying for safety. The engine had stopped while they were out in the sea. It stopped three times. The smuggler told them that if the engine doesn't work...it will be the end for all of them. It was God's will, who knew what each of them had done, maybe one of them had done a good deed or their parents had prayed for their safety. Maybe for a good deed done by one of them, they were all saved.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

As exhibited by these excerpts, family separation occurred throughout a family's process of fleeing Syria. Key moments of separation included immediately before leaving Syria and after residing in Jordan for a substantial period of time. Within Syria, young men would flee to Lebanon to avoid military conscription (in the early period of the crisis). As the crisis became more severe, other members of the family would decide to leave Syria and send one family member ahead to Jordan to find a place to live. At this stage, some family members (elderly parents) would be left behind in Syria (as a result of frailty, lack of appropriate identification documents or a desire not to leave home). Once inside Jordan, families would settle in and feel physically safe, but then begin to experience the pressures of expensive housing and healthcare and limited employment opportunities. As a result, families would make a second decision to separate, sending fathers, uncles and sons to Turkey and Europe. Several respondents did speak of a third point of separation in Turkey (where those traveling became separated and arrived to different European countries); however, the study participants were unable to expand on the details or the reasons for these outcomes.



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## 2. Social ties and social networks

The vast majority of participants spoke of family separation as destructive to kinship and social ties and difficult to manage mentally, emotionally and/or financially. One respondent described her psychological state, her feelings about being separated from her mother and the challenges of life in Jordan,

*“My mother has been in Germany for three years, my sister in Holland and my brother in France. I long to be reunited with them. My dream is to see them, to see my mother. I don’t want to be in Jordan. Every day, I am being reborn here. I’m psychologically exhausted. My husband earns 60 [dinars] a week. We need 120 for rent and 20 for water and electricity; that’s 150 for bills monthly. We were dying before the salary. Literally dying.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Her husband further described how being separated from family abroad made his immediate family in Jordan financially vulnerable and placed pressure on their relationships with members of their host-community. He stated,

*“I used to work in metalworking [in Syria]. My salary was good, I used to work from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM and work on the side, but thank God, I had my own house. That’s most important. My family was there and if I needed some money, I would borrow from them. Here, if I ask to borrow 5 dinars from the owner of this building until the end of the month, he turns me down. Here, if I borrow from a shopkeeper a couple of [dinars] and [don’t] give it back by the end of the week or the month, he’d come knocking on my door.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

A parent further identified how separation influenced his children’s connection to their extended family and their broader cultural traditions,

*“We’re not able teach them respect... Our values, principles and traditions - the Syrian ones, the ones we are proud of [are] almost being buried for the reason that everyone is in different countries. For example, my children have forgotten their grandparents.... My three daughters have forgotten them while the little ones have never met them before. They have no such thing as uncles or aunts at all. They don’t have any idea what that means. We try to ask them [the children] to talk to them [their aunts and uncles] on the phone, but they don’t care. It’s merely words to them.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

While separation appeared to change the nature of children’s relationships, it also dramatically changed the roles and responsibilities of all family members. Three significant adaptations included children entering the workforce, rather than attending school, women performing work outside of the home, and increased stress or tension between parents and children. One woman described her son’s process of dropping out of school,

*“He used to be very good at school and he didn’t want to drop out. Even when we came to the camp, I registered him in school and he continued his studies in the camp. Of course, he studied half of what was left in the year. Then, I dropped him out so he could work in the camp. He worked as a school guard, a kindergarten guard and a street cleaner. At first, he got 62 dinars per month but then they decreased it to 40 dinars per month. Afterwards, he got a cart, where he sold stuff in the market to make a living for him and us.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Another mother explained how her own role changed within the family structure in Jordan,

*“My husband was doing everything [in Syria]. He [brought] everything. I did not take care of anything. Now I am responsible for the children: six kids. I am also responsible for my father and mother. I bring everything they need. You can say I am the man of the house and the woman.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

Parenting also appeared to transform. One mother linked this transformation to the absence of her husband,

*“My children [are] teenagers and they became stronger, so I had to get more self-confident in order to face them. They even became a bit fiercer, because of their age. In Syria, they used to have everything they needed. When we came here, we found lots of differences in life. I needed to strengthen myself to inspire respect.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

Family separation has damaged or broken social connections and resulted in new and smaller networks, with less capacity to support one another. Weakened social networks impact various aspects of respondent’s lives including their psychosocial wellbeing, debt accumulation, parental roles, child labor and mother-child parenting dynamics. While all families expressed a combination of these challenges, families that were solely headed by women faced greater difficulty in several domains.



UNHCR/David Azia

### 3. Financial hardships and family separation

The vast majority of participants expressed significant difficulties associated with access to services, specifically access to healthcare, employment and housing. These burdens were all financial in nature, common across the sample and exacerbated by family separation. Separated families experience various financial vulnerabilities, which are negatively influenced by the absence of key family members. One grandmother described the detainment of her newborn grandson in a Jordanian hospital for inability to pay,

*“My grandchild was hospitalized in \_\_\_\_ hospital [in Jordan] for a month. It cost us 1650 dinars...She [my daughter] gave birth on the seventh... They didn't let him go for a month and a day until we paid them. I sold a piece of gold jewelry that I have and we took out some loans. We went to \_\_\_\_ NGO and thankfully, they gave me 130 [dinars]. And then all my son's friends gave him 50 each. Four of them gave 50, so that's 200 [dinars], and one gave us 80 [dinars]... I still have the report and the bills. I sent a request for help to Amman but it was declined.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Expanding on the challenge of accessing health services, a husband outlined his wife's complex health concerns and the costs associated with treatment,

*“My wife had 4 operations. All with the support of donors and charities and the support of my wife's relatives in Saudi Arabia. Medicine and health care in Jordan are all at our own expense ... The box of needles for MS [multiple sclerosis], which has only 3 needles, costs 272 dinars in Jordan... In Syria, because of the social service agency, any patient in need of surgery pays only something symbolic... In the government hospitals of Syria, all services were free... Two months ago, because of the slow movement of my wife, we had to do a CT scan for her head at a cost of 120 dinars... We must pay for all of this in Jordan.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Financial difficulties and family separation have also had specific consequences for school-aged refugee children. Many children and adolescents have dropped out of school and entered the workforce in order to support their families. One mother explains,

*“My children are responsible, they know the situation. We want to live and pay for the house. They never complain. The other boy [works at a] socks factory. His school refused to let him work. They said it's either school or work. They told us the same thing last year. He left school this year because we needed money. He wants to return to school. He was so upset about leaving his school... I told him that I will go to work next year and let him go to school.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

Another mother expands on this concept, describing her 12 year olds son's place of employment,

*“My son works in sewing, when the father can't. My son doesn't want to go to school anymore. He tells me, I want to go help my siblings, I want to go help my dad. If only you could see the place where he works. A basement, [an] underground workshop. Which is in a very bad condition, no sun enters it; it's humid. A boy his age shouldn't go there; he was born in 2005. He goes from 7:00 AM until 7:00 PM, he spends all this time in the basement underground. He carries cloth packages on his shoulders. He has backaches.... He's still a boy.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

The third major area of concern is the affordability of housing outside of the camp setting. The majority of participants did not pay rent in Syria and lived with or near their extended family (i.e., parents, adult siblings, in-laws), allowing for financial support when the need arose. In Jordan, all participants in urban settings had rental fees, were frequently separated from family members who could provide financial assistance (i.e., spouses, in-laws and adult siblings) and were either unable to work or were carrying out part-time informal work. Three participants below outlined their housing experiences in Jordan – noting high rent and severe debt accumulation.

*"You need to take 100-120 dinars immediately for water, electricity and the rent. I am renting this house for 100 dinars. Would not you need 10 for electricity? Or water? So, 120 is gone, and the rest for supplies... My neighbor loaned me money." (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

*"We owe 2,000 dinars for rent. But because the owners of the house are nice people, they did not report us or cause any problem. And since I have been receiving money from Basmat Ain [UNHCR aid] for eight months, I started paying rent. When he [husband] did not work - we did not pay rent for a whole year. It got accumulated, and now we owe 2,000 dinars." (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

*"I work in a store with a salary of 160 dinars [per month]. I will be honest with you - I do not pay for this house, I cannot. The rent is 150 dinars. I used to live in a house underground with humidity. The children would have asthma. The difference was 25 dinars, [so] we moved here. But I do not pay the rent for this house. I cannot pay it. If I work for 150 dinars more, I can pay. My uncles pay it for me." (male head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Respondents identified healthcare, employment and housing as significant challenges in Jordan. The intersection of these three resources cannot be overstated and, as noted by several respondents, are placing burden on their relationships – with neighbors, landlords and other community members.

The separation from key family members, the absence of their original social network (family and community) and the financial burdens of life in Jordan are resulting in increased stress, child labor, debt accumulation and strained relationships with host communities.

#### 4. Reunification policies and procedures

Reunification is considered a solution for a small percentage of Syrian refugees who have family members in Europe and GCC (i.e., 2.7% of Syrian refugees in Jordan have family members in Europe). However, European policies change frequently and contribute to separation between family members, while the procedures required to pursue reunification are expensive, complex and lack transparency. One respondent outlined her family's experience with changes to one European country's reunification policy,

*"I thought that when he went to [a European country] that we'd reunite after a year...The rules were simple. We didn't expect them to suspend the residency permits. Any person who went there would get residency in three months, and then start the procedures for a reunion...But after that a new law was declared and it made things more complicated...Now we are just waiting for something to happen...We [submitted] our documents to the embassy on our interview date, and my husband thought that he'd get a three-year residency before the date of the interview. The interview date came and he didn't get the residency duration he wanted. He even submitted an appeal, but it got denied... I don't know if there will be something new that would give him that in some way. Maybe in March 2018, when they open the residency window again." (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Another participant expressed her frustration with her attempts to reunify and described her neighbor's experience with formal attempts to do so with family in a GCC country,

*"Our papers are all in order. The delay is from them, not from us. The laws of the state itself. We only want them to permit family reunification, not for all the young men trying to enter... Everybody is trying. Many families here try to leave but are banned... We know a family where the mother and three kids are there [a GCC country]. She has two kids here. They are in one place and their mother is in another place. They applied for a visit for the whole family. They gave permission to three kids, but they left two others. So, the mother cannot choose, should she focus on her kids and husband there, or on her kids here? The situation is very hard." (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Two mothers also described their attempts to reunify in a European country. One wanted to reunite with her husband but would risk being separated from her son, while the other intended to reunify with her son but he turned 18 and was no longer eligible.

*“Had he [my husband] gotten three years, we would have been able to go, you know? Now he needs to spend this year. When the year ends, he must renew it and then get the three years residency so we can go [to the European country]. My son [who is in Jordan] will be above 18 then. He will not be able to go [to the European country]. I will not leave [Jordan] without him.” (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

*“Well, he [my son] tried [to reunite] but he couldn’t get the residency, before he turned 18 years old. He had to be a minor in order to apply for family reunification [in the European country]. He could have done so [when he was] under 18, but they didn’t grant him the residency before he turned 18. He waited for about a year.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

Several EU countries have established their own regulations in response to the refugee influx, designed to either inhibit or assist in the pathway to reunification. Greece requires a minimum of two-months of residency prior to application eligibility. Germany mandates proper living space and financial responsibility for family members as well as basic German language skills.<sup>26</sup> In March 2016, Germany suspended family reunification for 2 years for asylum seekers and issued “subsidiary protection” status, which provided a 1-year residency permit instead of the 3 years granted to those with full refugee status. In addition to spouses and biological children under the age of 18, Sweden also allows for legal residents to bring cohabitants as well as future spouses/cohabitants, and children of a spouse/cohabitant.<sup>27</sup> Hungary has extended the EU three-month eligibility window, allowing sponsors six months from being granted refugee status to apply for reunification. As exhibited, several countries have taken positive actions, but the barriers to reunification are not well managed and are insurmountable for many families.

Frequent policy changes are keeping Syrian families apart. Even when refugees are aware of with new requirements, the costs of most reunification processes are unaffordable. During interviews, respondents noted expenses related to documentation (i.e., marriage and birth certificates, passports, national IDs), appointments at UNHCR or embassies (i.e., taxis, public transportation), as well as flights and residency permits as being out of reach. While it is difficult to approximate the full costs of reunification, it is known that passports cost between \$350 USD and \$800 USD per person, marriage certificates cost between \$50 USD and \$100 USD, birth certificates are between \$75 USD and \$175 USD and visas are between \$50 USD and \$100 USD. Additionally, airfare between Jordan and Europe is, on average, \$1500 USD. These costs are insurmountable for most Syrian refugees considering that the majority are unable to work and those working in the informal sector earn approximately 150 dinars (\$211 USD) per month with living expenses that exceed their monthly income.

One participant described that even the smallest costs are deterrents to attempting the reunification process,

*“He [my brother] told me to apply [to the embassy in Amman]. But you need to calculate the expenses you need. Like for me, when my son sends me money, I will have 50 dinars. What will it do for me? If I went to Amman with it [for an embassy meeting], I will have to feed myself air. I must say the truth. I cannot go and spend money, with no results at the end. I do not have the capability. I wish that I could go and apply, but there is [no money]. I would rather spend these 50 dinars on my children, water, bread, and buy food for them. It is better for me.” (female head of household, arrive to Jordan in 2013)*

Lastly, respondents who managed the expenses and were able to undertake the reunification process expressed concerns about limited transparency and an inability to obtain updated information about their application – whether it was reviewed, being considered or lost in the system. One participant lamented,

*“Only the phone call is needed. At least to let us know what’s happening with our profile [or application]. Our simplest right is that at least they call us and tell us there’s hope. They need only to say: M\_\_\_, stand by. I am ready to wait a year or two... Until 2020. I can wait with this bad situation [in Jordan], if only they give me hope that I will leave one day. You just need to wait. And I will wait. But not like this, I have no idea what’s happening to my profile. Is it eligible, rejected, or being examined; where it is. Is it under the table? Where’s my profile? No one helps me. No one. I tried to visit the social services, but first of all, they don’t have a desk for resettlement there. There’s the protection section, information about the fingerprint, and other matters. I’m a regular in K\_\_\_ every month, but in vain.” (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

Many study participants with family in Europe still believed reunification was a possibility, while those with family in GCC did not anticipate reunification; and those with family in Syria were awaiting safe return. While Europe is the likeliest place for reunification, participants expressed a great deal of difficulty with the process – first, knowing how to get started, second, affording the expenses associated with the application and third, accessing information while the application was under consideration. One dispirited respondent with family members in Germany, Belgium, Jordan, UAE, Turkey and Syria stated to the interviewer,

*“In the end it is a must that we get together - and we will get together - whether in this world or the next.” (male only head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2012).*

## 5. Perceptions about durable solutions

This final thematic area explores Syrian refugee perceptions on durable solutions. The study sample included families with separated members spread across the globe with a focus on Europe (i.e., Germany, Sweden, Holland), GCC (i.e., Kuwait, Saudi Arabia) and Syria, but also included Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, USA and Canada. Diversity existed about what solutions were best for each family, but their desires were aligned with the location of their separated family member(s). Within the sample, 74 of the 85 Syrian refugees with family members in other countries clearly articulated their preferred durable solution. Table 2 reflects these results.

Those with the majority of their key family members (parents and children) in Syria planned to return when safe and would remain in Jordan awaiting this possibility. Those with key family members in third countries were more likely to state a desire to move to Europe, the US or Canada (Table 2).

**Table 2. Relationship between family location and desired durable solution:**

Location of separated family members	Total (N=74)	Preferred Reunification Country or Region		
		Return to Syria (N=25) (%)	Third Country (N=28) (%)	Remain in Jordan (N=21) (%)
European Separation	31	22.6%	58%	19.4%
Middle East Separation	43	41.9%	23%	35%

\*74 of the 85 participants expressed a preferred solution

\*\*The category, Middle East separation, is inclusive of families with separated members who remained in Syria.



While decisions to flee are influenced by many factors including employment and educational opportunities, the location of key family members is also central to flight decision making and worthy of exploration and effective policy making. Several respondents explained their reasons for wanting to remain in Jordan,

*"I don't want to go [to a third country]. If I want to, I'll go from Za'atari [camp] to Syria. There are no other options. We don't have anyone anywhere else. My children are mostly in Syria and my parents are here [Jordan]. My husband's family is here. My sisters-in-law are here, my sisters are here, my cousins are here, and my father is here." (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2012)*

*"...Because we live here [in Jordan] and we are happy. We speak the language, too, while if we go there [third country] you'll need at least one or two years to learn the language... You won't be able to go out as much and you won't know many people." (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

*"No, for life in Syria, there is no security. The situation is not good... And we cannot go to another country, except to Kuwait. We will not go to another place like America. If Kuwait does not permit our entrance, we will stay here. This is the best solution for both [speaking of husband and self]." (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

*"I don't want to go to Syria myself. But we are afraid that we will be forced to go back. We don't understand and we are afraid... Here [Jordan] is better... Here is the safe place. People who went to Lebanon and Turkey are suffering a lot. Here is the safest place. The people in Za'atari [camp] are living good, we are living a good life. Thank God." (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2012)*

Respondents who wanted to leave Jordan and travel to a third country shared their motivations for this preference,

*"The decision is to leave this place. Go abroad so I can see him [my husband], and he could see his kids. And provide my children's future in the first place." (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

*"Hopefully, to Germany or Holland with my sister. But being with my mother is more important... and my two brothers, too. It will be easier for us to visit each other. My sister in Holland is close to Germany, she can take a three-hour train ride to arrive there. They were all gathered together; my two brothers and my sister with my mother. When I see them calling me crying, I cry too. And my mother prays for me to join them; to be with her. Yesterday she was telling me, when the committee comes to visit you, tell them how much we need you to come. I pray to God you will come to me." (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

*"I'm staying in Jordan for the [reunification] only. Nothing else. I want to go to my family [in various European countries], so I'm staying in Jordan. I have no other motive to live in Jordan. Nothing else. I decided to stay here until the [reunification] call comes. Until they ring me up to go to my family. That's the only thing that's keeping me in Jordan." (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

While many respondents could articulate their desired solutions, several expressed an overwhelming sense of uncertainty about the future and only communicated a need to reunify in whatever country would allow it.

*"The most important thing is to reunite with them. I do not care about the place. In Jordan, I cannot think of a better situation. As for an Arab country to live in, for my job and my comfort, I cannot think of something else. Nothing is bothering us. What is bothering us is we are in a place and our family is in another. If we reunited in Jordan, Saudi Arabia or even Sweden, I do not care. The most important thing is to be together." (male head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

*"If there is a country to reunify me with my husband and my daughters, I will go for sure. I will not say no." (dual head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2014)*

*"I don't know what will happen in the future. I look at my current situation and wonder how much longer things will last like this. I wonder about what will happen in the future but I have no idea. I don't know whether I'll stay here or I'll leave – or maybe he [my husband] will come back, or we might all go back to Syria, I just don't know." (female head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2013)*

*"Honestly, I have no idea what will happen. But we are pretty much back to zero, and it might take 100 years to overcome this - what was destroyed cannot be rebuilt. That is for sure." (male head of household, arrived to Jordan in 2012)*

Respondents exuded a sense of stagnation as a result of being unable to reunify or make concrete decisions about the future.

The 5 themes presented here are an aid for considering the causes, mechanisms and impact of family separation on Syrian refugees in Jordan and across the Middle East. This analysis also identifies points of entry for interventions that decrease factors that promote separation, build resilience among separated families and improve reunification policies and procedures. Respondents articulated distinct moments of separation when fleeing Syria, broken social networks, challenges in accessing services, policies and procedures that created barriers to reunification, and a desire to find a permanent solution that reconnected them with significant members of their family.

# CONCLUSION

Nearly 36.5% of all registered Syrian refugees in Jordan are separated from a member of their family with 2.6% and 6.8% of refugees with a separated family member in Europe and Gulf Cooperation Council countries, respectively.<sup>17</sup> This study found that family separation exacerbates financial burdens, and exposes refugees to serious protection risks, including harsh child labor, broken social networks, parenting challenges and changes to familial roles.

The risks and vulnerabilities associated with being a refugee family with separation are theoretically managed through the process of reunification. However, reunification policies and procedures have been identified as obstacles to reuniting refugee families.<sup>7,22,23</sup> These obstacles include obtaining residency status, age restrictions on children, proving dependence and relationships, and earning a minimum income. Typically, the window of opportunity to apply for reunification is either very short (first few months) or long delayed until residency is achieved (3-5 years).<sup>24,25</sup>

Reunification procedures are complex, frequently changing, limited to nuclear familial relationships and out of reach for a large number of Syrian refugee families. This study summarizes 5 core themes that describe the causes, mechanisms and effects of family separation. Each core theme provides global actors, national policymakers and practitioners an opportunity to improve reunification procedures and services for Syrian refugees, as well as other refugee communities with similar experiences. Examples of potential improvements include expanding the definition of family; investing in the prevention of unintended consequences of separation, like child labor; improving internet access and other tools that foster social connection; developing real-time platforms for information sharing on reunification policies and processes; fundraising for reunification expenses for qualified families, and better advocating with third countries for responsibility sharing.

This study recognizes that family reunification is a complementary pathway to solutions for the vast majority of separated families. Further, reunification of Syrian refugees with family in Europe is more than feasible, given that less than 3% of Syrian refugees in Jordan (~17,000 people) have separated family members in Europe.

If the aim of responding to refugee crises is to save lives and to help families thrive and contribute to the rebuilding of their future, then reunification must be considered an essential component of complementary pathways and obstacles preventing reunification must be urgently addressed.

# APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH METHODS

## Study design

A cross-sectional multi-method study was conducted to explore the impact of family separation on Syrian refugees in Jordan. The study included a demographic analysis of the UNHCR database to gather basic information about separation in refugee families. A policy review was also conducted to capture reunification policies in the top 10 countries hosting Syrian refugees (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Iraq, Egypt, Hungary, Germany, Canada, and Sweden) and to understand what information about the process existed in the public domain. Finally, 85 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Syrian refugees identified through the UNHCR database.

## Sample

The study team conducted 85 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Syrian refugee families in Jordan. UNHCR Jordan provided an initial random sample of 220 registered refugees who were over 18, living in Jordan, and had separated family members in Europe, Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC), and/or Syria. Purposeful, non-random sampling was utilized to identify the final 85 respondents. The final sample was nationally representative on three indicators: (1) dual vs. female heads of household, (2) geographic diversity across Jordan and (3) camp vs. non-camp residence (Table 1). The team oversampled families with nuclear family separation (spouses and children under 18) in Europe and GCC in order to better understand the experience of this specific community. Although a principal respondent from each household was contacted for interviews, the presence of other family members was welcomed and many actively participated in interviews.

## Data collection

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in Arabic with Syrian refugees across Jordan during the month of August 2017. Most interviews occurred in the participant's home (n=73) and a small number of interviews took place at the UNHCR office in Amman (n=12). Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. When participants declined recording, detailed written notes were taken. Data collectors utilized an interview guide (Appendix 2) that investigated 6 topics related to family separation: (1) family structure, (2) the process of separation and fleeing, (3) efforts to reunify, (4) life in Jordan, (5) parent and child dynamics and (6) perceptions about future reunification. Each topic had one question and multiple probes, although the interviews were flexible in nature to allow for narratives to form. The research team included a mix of national and international researchers from diverse backgrounds in social work, forced migration, epidemiology, health systems, child protection, population health, psychology and medicine. Researchers participated in a 3-day training and orientation in Amman, Jordan focused on qualitative methods, confidentiality, informed consent and interview skill-building. The team also attended a 2-hour orientation with UNHCR on the refugee situation in Jordan and the current UNHCR response. All researcher procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Columbia University Medical Center in New York, USA, Jordanian Ministry of Interior and the Institutional Review Board at King Hussein Cancer Center in Amman, Jordan.

## Data analysis

Following the interview, the data collectors completed a debrief worksheet to reflect on the interview experience and interview content. Recorded interviews were transcribed and translated from Arabic audio directly to written English by an external vendor. Coding was approached using the qualitative principles of the constant comparative method.<sup>29</sup> A preliminary thematic structure was created based on a sub-sample of 7 transcripts read by 7 researchers who independently developed themes. These themes were later refined based upon the full team reading 3 additional transcripts. A codebook was created and all transcripts were coded and analyzed using Dedoose (version 7.6.21). Items regarding demographics, date of arrival, and level of family separation were provided by UNHCR Jordan database and triangulated during interviews for confirmation. Numerical and categorical data were subsequently coded for relevant quantitative analysis.

## Strengths and limitations

This study has several strengths worth expanding upon. First, the qualitative approach to understanding the refugee experience provides greater depth and nuance than is frequently available. Second, this level of detail provides several entry points for those responsible for policy development and implementation. Third, amplifying the voices of refugees allows for more compelling and accurate telling of their stories. One limitation to note is that the identity of each researcher, specifically gender, may have influenced participant responses. In most cases, however, the study team was able to match the gender of the researcher with the gender of the main participant. This was particularly important when interviewing single women and female heads of households.



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# APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

## **1. Can you tell me who was in your household when you lived in Syria?**

- a. Probes included: Tell me more about your living situation in Syria (location of family, work experience, relationships). Where is each family member living now?

## **2. Why did your family make the decision to separate?**

- a. Probes included: Describe your journey from Syria to Jordan?

## **3. How long have you been separated from \_\_\_\_\_ (list each family member who they are separated from)?**

- a. Probes included: Have you tried to reunite with your family member(s)? Can you describe in what ways you have tried to reunite with them? What barriers or obstacles have you faced in trying to reunite?

## **4. Can you describe your family who is here in Jordan?**

- a. Probes included: Within your family here in Jordan, how have the roles of each family member changed since moving from Syria? How has your role changed?

## **5. How has your role as a parent changed since arriving to Jordan?**

- a. Probes included: What is the most significant difference between the way you care for your children now compared to the way you cared for your children in Syria? If you have a child or children between the ages of \_\_\_\_ (insert age categories), how have their lives changed since moving to Jordan?

## **6. If anything were possible, would you prefer to return home; remain in Jordan or resettle to a third country?**

- a. Probes included: Why is this your preferred solution? What would need to happen to ensure this option is safe and viable? Tell us what you see for your future?

*Note: Opening and closing statements were made, and informed consent was received before beginning all interviews. Several examples of probes are noted above but are not exhaustive of all possible probing that occurred during these semi-structured, in-depth interviews.*

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# IMPACT OF SEPARATION ON REFUGEE FAMILIES

## SYRIAN REFUGEES IN JORDAN