

# The Wellbeing of Syrian Refugees: Shifting from Humanitarian to Developmental Response in Jordan<sup>1</sup>

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## In a nutshell

- Syrian refugees in Jordan are a very young population, disproportionately in female-headed households (23%), and living in host communities (87%) rather than official refugee camps.
- Current food supports and work permit provisions are insufficient to ensure food and financial security among refugee households.
- Despite provisions under the Jordan Compact to open work permits to refugees, refugees' participation in Jordan's labor force remains very limited.
- Investments in the human capital of this very young population are essential; school enrollment is often late and drop-out occurs early.
- Although most refugees are able to access healthcare, they are vulnerable to financial hardship in the case of illness due to a lack of health insurance (75% without insurance).
- The initial humanitarian response to the refugee influx must shift to a developmental response to protect this vulnerable population and invest in the human capital that will allow them to contribute to the Jordanian economy and society, as well as the possible future reconstruction of Syria.

## Syrian refugees in the context of Jordan

The 2011 conflict in Syria has displaced millions, both within Syria and into neighboring countries. Jordan, as of 2015, was hosting around 1.3 million Syrians (Department of Statistics (Jordan) 2015). Most Syrian refugees in Jordan arrived in 2012 and 2013 (Krafft et al. 2018; UNHCR

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by a grant to the Economic Research Forum from the Ford Foundation on "Youth and Vulnerability in the Middle East and North Africa."

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2018) and thus have been in Jordan for several years already. The Syrian conflict continues, with the end uncertain. Additionally, some refugees may be unable or unwilling to return to Syria even if or when the conflict ends; while a third of the Syrian refugees in Jordan who fled due to violence, persecution, or security reported that the opposition controlled their hometown when they left, two-thirds reported the government was in control (Krafft et al. 2018). The initial challenge of providing humanitarian relief to Syrian refugees has thus shifted to the long-term challenge of their development. Investments in the health and human capital of this population are essential for their success and potential contributions to Jordan, as well as to the possible reconstruction of Syria in the future.

The Jordanian government and international community have undertaken an enormous response effort to provide humanitarian assistance and support Syrian refugees' development. The Jordan Response Plan (JRP) incorporates both immediate humanitarian action and longer-term development (Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation 2017). The international community has supported Jordan's efforts through both action on the ground and funding, although funding shortfalls remain a challenge. The shift towards longer-term thinking about the joint development of Syrian refugees and Jordanians is also reflected in the 2016 Jordan Compact, which included aid and trade concessions as well as opening up a work permit program for refugees (Bellamy et al. 2017; European Commission 2016). These broad policy initiatives were designed to address development needs and be mutually beneficial for Syrian refugees and Jordanians.

Despite the substantial efforts of the Jordanian government and international community, Syrian refugees in Jordan face substantial challenges as their period of displacement extends. To assess how Syrian refugees are faring in Jordan, this policy brief presents some of the first nationally representative data on the Syrian refugee population in Jordan from the Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey (JLMPS) 2016.

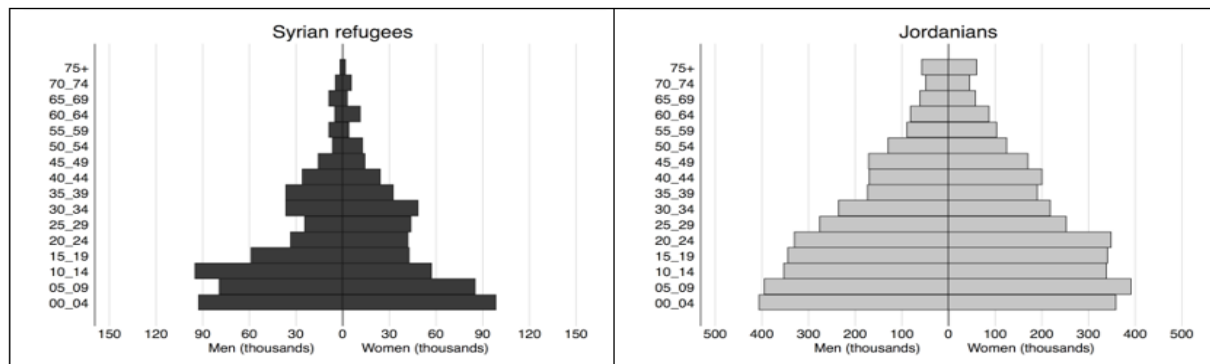
The data provide a comprehensive view of who the Syrian refugees are, where they are located in Jordan, and their socioeconomic and health outcomes at this stage in their displacement. Such data are a critical input for evidence-based policies as the Jordanian government and its partners in the refugee response shift from a focus on immediate humanitarian relief to refugees' long-term development needs. In addition to better understanding refugees' need for support, we consider their potential contributions and impacts in the context of Jordan.

### *Who are the Syrian refugees in Jordan?*

The Syrian refugees in Jordan are a very young population. Almost half are under the age of 15. Figure 1 compares the population structure of Syrian refugees in Jordan to the population structure of Jordanian nationals. Although the Jordanian population is also quite young, when comparing the two populations there is a noticeable gap in working-age and especially older adults in the Syrian refugee population.

Among Syrian refugee adults, aged 20-34 in particular, there are fewer men than women. Syrian refugees in Jordan report more male family members dying, which may be one cause, as well as male Syrians remaining in Syria to fight or for other reasons, or men choosing to migrate to different destinations (Krafft et al. 2018). As a result of these complex dynamics, a quarter (23%) of Syrian refugee households in Jordan have a female head (compared to 14% of Jordanian households). The loss and absence of family members, high number of children per household, and substantial share of female-headed households will affect the services and support refugees need and the contributions they can make.

Figure 1. Population structure (in thousands), Syrian refugees and Jordanians, 2016



Source: Krafft et al. (2018)

The skills that Syrian refugees brought to Jordan are also an important factor in considering refugees' needs and potential contributions to Jordan. Adult Syrian refugees (men and women aged 25-64) predominantly have low levels of education, according to the JLMPS 2016. While 21% are illiterate, 52% can read and write but did not complete basic education. Around 8% completed basic education and 10% secondary education, while 9% have a higher education.

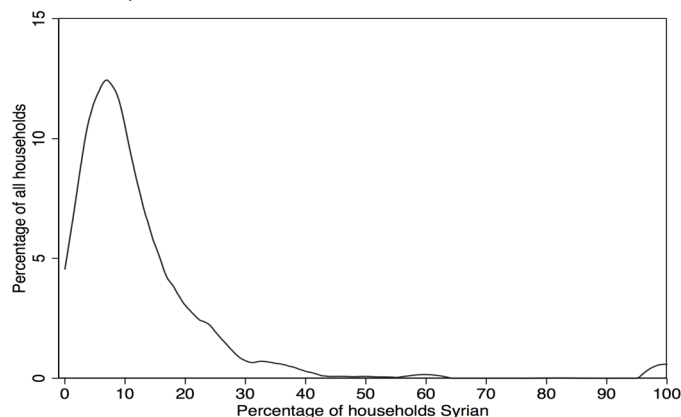
From the JLMPS 2016 labor market history questions, we know what jobs Syrian refugees had in 2010, just prior to the conflict. Among those refugees who were employed in 2010, the most common industry was manufacturing (28%) followed by wholesale and retail trade (25%), agriculture (13%), and construction (10%). Relatively few (10%) held formal jobs with contracts or social insurance, but a number were nonetheless in professional occupations (13%). The Syrian refugees in Jordan thus have a diverse set of skills to contribute to the economy.

### *Where are the Syrian refugees in Jordan?*

Syrian refugees in Jordan primarily live in host communities. According to the JLMPS 2016, 83% of Syrian refugees were living in urban areas, just 4% in rural areas, and the remaining 13% in the (official) refugee camps of Za'atari and Azraq. Figure 2 shows the variation in the percentage of all households in each neighborhood that are Syrian according to the 2015

Population Census. Most households in Jordan are in neighborhoods where between 5% and 15% of households are Syrian. Overall, Syrians are dispersed throughout Jordanian host communities. This dispersal requires that programs and policies to support refugees be distributed throughout Jordan and able to reach a geographically spread out population. It also means that refugees have opportunities to go to school, work, shop, or receive existing services that are present in Jordanian towns and cities.

**Figure 2. Percentage of households that are Syrian in a neighborhood (as a percentage of all households), 2015**

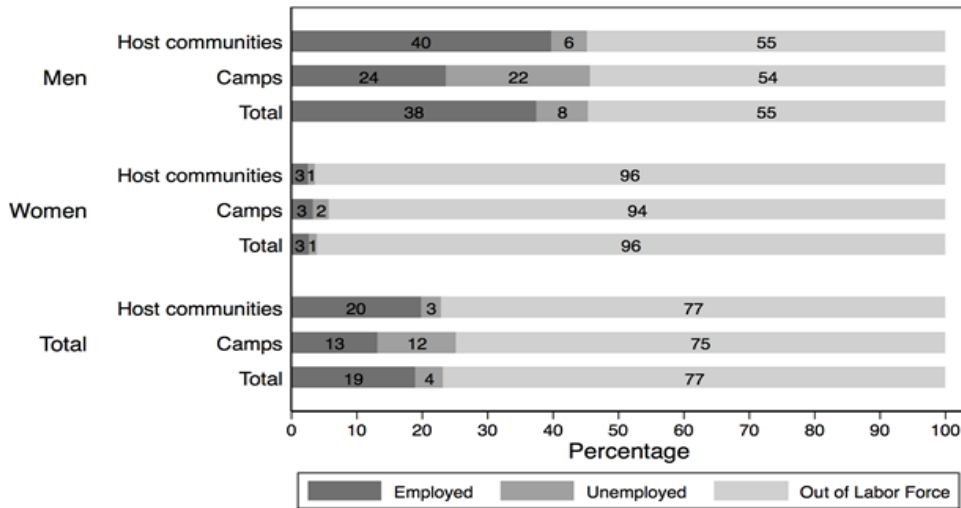


Source: Authors' calculations based on Population and Housing Census 2015, correspondence with DoS.

### *Are Syrian refugees working?*

The Jordan Compact includes provisions that allowed Syrian refugees to obtain annual work permits and work legally in Jordan starting in early 2016 (European Commission 2016). Refugees (and other non-Jordanian workers) are restricted to certain sectors—mainly agriculture, construction, and manufacturing—sectors which disproportionately employed migrant workers even before the arrival of the refugees (ILO 2017; Razzaz 2017). Despite the work permit program, few Syrian refugees are in the labor force (either employed or unemployed and seeking work). Figure 3 shows the labor market status of Syrian refugees aged 15-64 in 2016. Just 23% of Syrian refugees—45% of men and 4% of women—are in the labor force. Only 38% of men and 3% of women are employed. There is also an important difference in terms of labor market outcomes across locations. In camps, almost half of those who are in the labor force are unemployed, suggesting that employment opportunities are limited in the camps compared to host communities.

Figure 3. Labor market status (percentage), by location and sex, Syrian refugees aged 15-64, 2016



Source: Krafft et al. (2018)

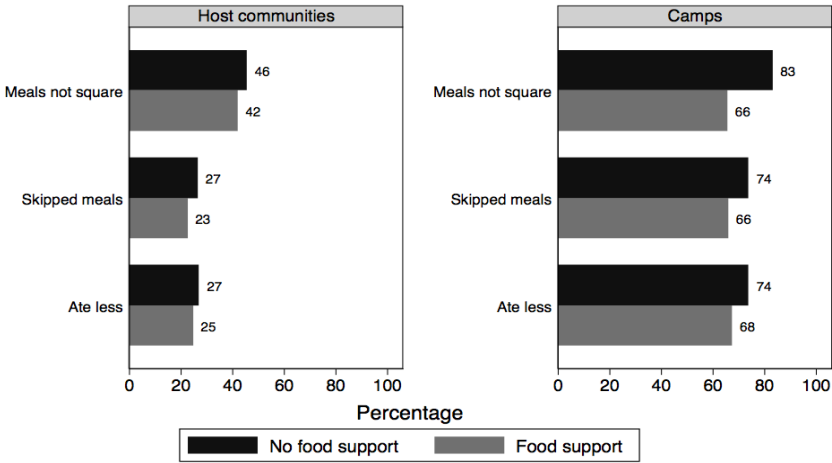
Based on the JLMPS 2016, which generates population level-statistics based on the 2015 Census, we estimate there are 117,000 employed Syrians, relative to about 1.3 million employed Jordanians and 474,000 workers of other nationalities (Fallah, Krafft, and Wahba 2018). Even among those Syrian refugees who are working, most are working informally (we estimate 89% (Krafft et al. 2018)), without a contract or social insurance. Although formal workers were more likely to have permits than informal workers, the JLMPS 2016 estimate suggests there were only 44,000 permit holders (Krafft et al. 2018). This estimate is quite consistent with official statistics from the Ministry of Labor, which indicated there were 37,000 permits issued between January 1, 2016 and January 1, 2017 (Ministry of Labour Syrian Refugee Unit 2017). Thus, the majority of Syrians are working both informally and without documentation, deprived of employment protections. There is also relatively low take-up of the work permit scheme under the Jordan Compact, under which a total of 200,000 work opportunities for Syrian refugees were made available.

### *Can Syrian refugees meet their basic needs?*

Syrian refugees in Jordan have limited financial resources (and often substantial debts), few are working, and most are reliant on aid (UNHCR 2015). More than half (55%) of Syrian refugees are among the poorest 20% of households in Jordan, based on an asset index of durable goods and housing conditions from the JLMPS 2016. Among Syrian refugees in camps, more than 99% were among the poorest 20% of households in Jordan. These obstacles mean that Syrian refugees often cannot meet their basic needs. For example, Syrian refugees in Jordan struggle with food insecurity. Figure 4 shows the percentage of Syrian refugees who, in the last 12 months, experienced different types of food insecurity: (1) not eating square (full) meals (2) skipping meals or (3) eating less at meals because sufficient food was not available. These different measures of food insecurity are shown by whether refugees reside in camps or host communities, and whether or not they receive food support (World Food Program vouchers or ration cards).

Refugees living in camps have much worse food insecurity than those in host communities, although neither group is food secure. Between 23-42% of those receiving food support and living in host communities were food insecure across the different measures. In contrast, between 66-83% of those receiving food support and living in camps were food insecure across the same measures. Other studies in Jordan suggest that the monthly vouchers refugees receive only cover 17-20 days of food in camps (UNHCR 2016). Living in host communities may make it easier for refugees to find less expensive food from local businesses or to undertake livelihood activities that help support their nutrition.

**Figure 4. Food insecurity (percentage) among Syrian refugees aged 15-59, by residence and receipt of food supports, 2016**



Source: Krafft et al. (2018)  
 Notes: Based on experiencing food insecurity measure within the past 12 months.

Almost all (91%) of refugees in camps reported receiving food support and 72% of those in host communities (Krafft et al. 2018). It is important to keep in mind that individuals’ eligibility for food supports is based on vulnerability and need; thus, we would expect individuals receiving food supports to have substantially worse outcomes in the absence of food supports. Those receiving food support do have slightly better outcomes than those without food support across the measures. Refugees with food support

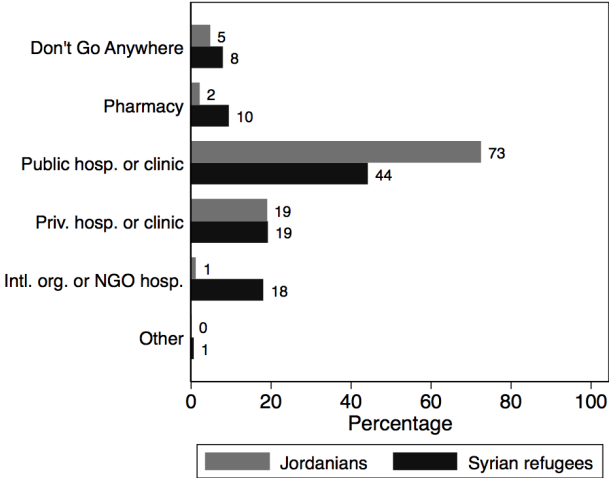
had between 2 and 17 percentage points lower food insecurity across measures and locations than those without food supports. Yet those receiving supports still experienced substantial levels of food insecurity.

Although few Syrian refugees have health insurance (only 25% (Krafft et al. 2018)), the vast majority do manage to access health care when they need it. Figure 5 shows the usual health care source Syrian refugees use, compared to Jordanians, when they need care. Only 8% of Syrians (slightly more than 5% of

care. Only 8% of Syrians (slightly more than 5% of Jordanians) do not go for health care when they need it. The most common source of care for Syrian refugees is public hospitals or clinics (44%, compared to 73% for Jordanians). Syrian refugees and Jordanians are equally likely (19%) to use private hospitals or clinics, which are more expensive (Doocy et al. 2016). Syrian refugees are more likely than Jordanians to rely on international organization or

NGO care (18%) or pharmacies (10%). Thus, while Syrian refugees are accessing care when needed, they may be receiving more limited services at pharmacies and may also face substantial financial burdens when using private clinics, as well as public clinics, where refugees have to pay uninsured rates (Doocy et al. 2016).

**Figure 5. Health care source (percentage), Syrian refugees and Jordanians aged 6+, 2016**



Source: Krafft et al. (2018)

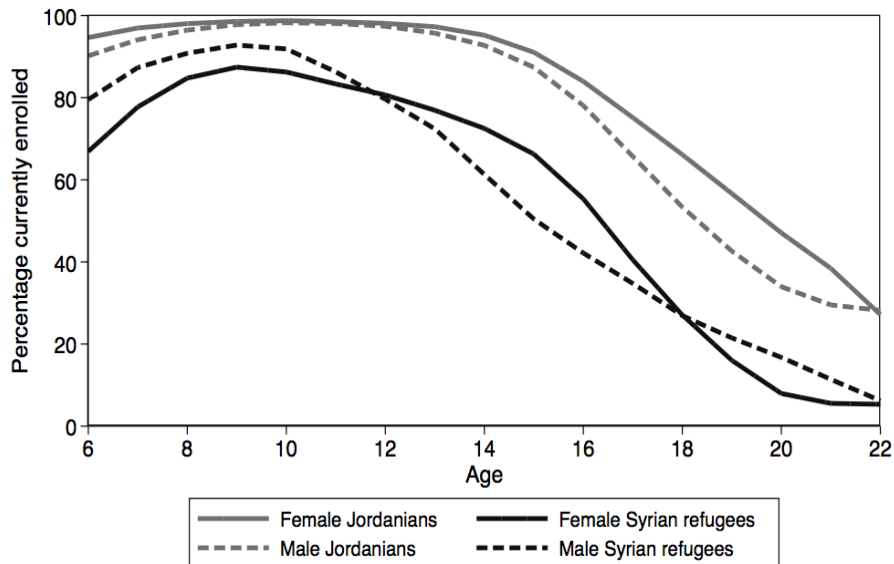
*Are Syrian refugee children in school?*

Whether Syrian refugee children receive an education will affect not only their wellbeing in the present, but also their ability to contribute to the future development of either Syria, should they return, or Jordan, should they remain. Substantial resources have been devoted to creating space for Syrian children in Jordan’s public schools, with free education available at the basic and secondary stages (Human Rights Watch 2016). Adding multiple shifts to existing schools has allowed for relatively rapid scale up of school access, but also has disadvantages in terms of shorter instructional time and stretched resources.

boys and girls who enroll on time. Enrollments do increase with age, but peak around 80-85% at age 9-10. These enrollment rates are below the near-universal level of primary school enrollments in Syria pre-conflict (League of Arab States and Syrian Arab Republic 2011). Enrollment rates fall through the teenage years for Syrian refugees, and are, again, slightly lower than enrollment rates in Syria prior to the conflict. As seen in the figure, Jordanian teenagers have substantially higher school enrollment rates for both boys and girls.

Figure 6 shows enrollment rates of Syrian refugees and Jordanians, by age. While around 65% of Syrian girls are enrolled in school on time at age 6 and around 80% of Syrian boys, these rates are substantially lower than the more than 90% of Jordanian

Figure 6. Enrollment rates (percentage) by age, Syrian refugees and Jordanians, 2016



Source: Krafft et al. (2018)

The primary reason that Syrian refugee children who left school since 2011 and are currently out of school gave for their school exit is the conflict in Syria (60% (Krafft et al. 2018)). This indicates that many children who left school because of the conflict did not re-enroll once they arrived in Jordan. There are clearly barriers to re-enrolling and continuing in school in Jordan given refugees' lower enrollments compared to Syria pre-conflict and Jordanians. Documentation requirements were historically a barrier for refugee children to enroll in school after arriving in Jordan, but those have been removed (Al Abed 2017). Only children who are within three years of age of their grade level can enroll, which leaves many children out of the standard school system and in need of "catch-up" programs (Human Rights Watch 2016). Families may also face difficulties in affording associated costs of schooling, rely on children's economic contributions to the household, or face other barriers to children's enrollment.

*What are the next steps to support Syrian refugees in Jordan?*

The Jordanian government and the international community have invested substantially in supporting the Syrian refugee community in Jordan. This policy brief demonstrated that while Syrian refugees receive aid and benefit from policies that give them access to services, they still face numerous challenges and are struggling to achieve their full potential and maintain a basic standard of living. In assessing the wellbeing of refugees and their potential contributions to their Jordanian host communities, as well as in designing policy and programmatic supports for refugees, it is important to keep in mind who the refugees are. The Syrian refugees in Jordan are a very young population, disproportionately in female-headed households, and dispersed throughout Jordanian host communities. As demonstrated by new evidence from the JLMPS 2016, this vulnerable population needs support across a range of sectors:



### *Education*

Developmental needs for the young Syrian refugees are substantial and further investments in enrolling and maintaining Syrian children in school are essential. While many Syrian children do enroll in school, their enrollment rates are well below Jordanians as well as rates in Syria prior to the crisis. Enrollment is often late and drop-out occurs early. Students whose education was interrupted by the conflict have had limited success continuing learning in Jordan. Continuing efforts to increase access to education for refugees are needed. While progress has been made in removing documentation barriers (Al Abed 2017), the multi-faceted challenges refugee families face in keeping their children in school will require complex and multi-dimensional supports in response. There is a need to test different interventions and policies to support refugees in staying in school.

### *Healthcare*

Syrian refugees in Jordan are generally able to obtain health care when needed. Refugees do disproportionately rely on pharmacies and international organizations or NGOs for their care and lack health insurance. Thus, cost of care may be an increasingly important barrier to refugees receiving needed and high-quality healthcare, particularly since international organizations' and NGOs' funding may not be sustainable. Refugee households are also vulnerable to increased financial hardship due to health expenditures.

### *Food security*

The high rates of food insecurity among Syrian refugees threaten the long-term development of this vulnerable population. Although food supports help refugees, they are insufficient (and often insufficiently funded (Bellamy et al. 2017)) to ensure food security. Both continuing food supports and providing refugees with other avenues to fulfill their basic needs are critical. Particularly concerning are the high rates of food insecurity within refugee camps. Limited livelihood opportunities or alternative sources of food in the camps may be contributing to high insecurity. However, refugees cannot easily (legally) leave the camps (Salemi, Bowman, and Compton 2018).

Refugees who do leave the camps cannot receive documentation in their host communities, which is a further barrier to receiving assistance or contributing to host communities. The recent joint effort of UNHCR and the Jordanian Ministry of the Interior to formalize and document certain Syrian refugees who left the camps without authorization and are living informally in host communities is a promising effort to support refugees and their success in Jordan (Jordan Times 2018). Providing additional avenues and opportunities for refugees living in camps to enhance their wellbeing and contribute to host communities should be considered.

### *Livelihoods*

Supporting livelihood opportunities for Syrian refugees could help address the challenges they face across the areas of education, health, and food security. The Jordan Compact and work permit program are an important, development-minded model for other countries to consider in allowing refugees to contribute to the local economy and support their wellbeing. However, take-up of work permits has been limited and refugees remain primarily without documentation and informally employed, and lack work protections. Refugees' participation in Jordan's labor force is very limited. Efforts to address refugees' and employers' concerns about work permits to increase take-up are needed. In addition, the high unemployment rates in camps suggest that there are limited opportunities in camps for Syrian refugees who wish to work. Opening up avenues for refugees currently in camps to work in host communities can improve refugees' wellbeing and economic contributions. Since the JLMPS 2016, work permits have been extended to camp residents to allow them to leave for up to one month at a time, first in Za'atari (Jordan Times 2017) and more recently in Azraq (Ibanez Prieto 2018). Such programs are promising and should be expanded.

The Syrian refugees in Jordan are a vulnerable population in need of continued support from the Jordanian government and the international community. Substantial strides have been made to provide

refugees with essential services. Yet critical challenges for the government and international community going forward will be addressing the gaps in services, the ongoing challenges refugees face as their displacement becomes longer, and ensuring they have the opportunity to develop to their full potential. Investments in the wellbeing and opportunities for refugees can make an important contribution to Jordan as well as Syria, when or if refugees are able to return.

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