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Refugees, Humanitarian Challenges, and Shared Responsibilities

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Executive Summary

The Middle East remains at the center of global displacement crises, which have been driven by protracted conflicts in Palestine, Yemen, Syria, and Sudan. Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and North African states such as Libya and Tunisia are all facing mounting challenges in accommodating refugees amidst dwindling international support. Meanwhile, many European states continue to externalize border-control procedures, rather than equitably share responsibility in light of their commitments under the 2018 UN Global Compact on Refugees, their obligations under international refugee and human rights law, and the principles contained in the European Convention on Human Rights.

This policy brief examines the key drivers of displacement, the evolving responses of host countries, and the role of international actors, ultimately recommending a recalibrated approach to burden-sharing and refugee protection response.

Introduction

The Middle East has long been the epicenter of protracted displacement, with consecutive conflicts generating mass refugee flows. In recent years, the humanitarian landscape has been further exacerbated by the ongoing Israeli military campaigns in Gaza and West Bank, the persistent threat of forced Palestinian displacement, the long-lasting Syria refugee crises and Syria's political transition, the Yemen war, and the escalation of displacement (in and out of) from Sudan. Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, and North African countries such as Libya and Tunisia remain key host countries, shouldering an immense burden with diminishing international support. Meanwhile, some European (member states) have increasingly externalized border control while failing to provide adequate financial and structural support to frontline states.

The War on Gaza and the Protracted Displacement of Palestinians

The war on Gaza has resulted in an unparalleled humanitarian catastrophe, with over 1.9 million Palestinians displaced—constituting nearly 90% of the total population (United Nations, 2025). The destruction of civilian infrastructure, the siege on humanitarian aid, and the targeted attacks on refugee shelters exacerbate the crisis. Beyond Gaza, the West Bank continues to experience heightened settler violence, forced evictions, and state-sanctioned expropriations, systematically undermining Palestinian residency rights (United Nations, European Union, and World Bank, 2025). The international legal framework remains largely ineffective in preventing forced displacement, despite the clear violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention (ICRC, 2024).

Regional displacement pressures extend to neighboring Egypt, Jordan, and North African countries, which historically absorbed waves of Palestinian refugees. However, these states have grown increasingly resistant to further influxes, citing economic strain and security concerns (HRW, 2024). Egypt has reinforced border security measures, limiting Palestinian mobility, while Jordan remains steadfast in its non-expansion of refugee status recognition for newly displaced Palestinians. These restrictions underscore the growing limitations of host countries in accommodating further displacement without significant international intervention.

The Ban on UNRWA

On 28 October 2024, the Israeli Knesset passed two laws banning UNRWA in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). They entered into force on 30 January 2025. While initial indications were that implementation was slow, the second half of February 2025 saw pressure mounting toward the forced closure of several agency installations in East-Jerusalem. The laws could cripple the humanitarian operation despite it being significantly expanded following the recent ceasefire. Gaza is largely destroyed and even with a lasting ceasefire, the UNRWA ban could lead to the collapse of education and health care for thousands, also in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

The timing of the ban is particularly unfortunate because UNRWA's long-term financial crisis is far from over. Thus, while adapting to a new legal and political reality, UNRWA may at some point during 2025 be faced with the prospect of being unable to pay staff, limiting their ability to pull the agency through the storm. This combined challenge is exacerbated by Trump's return to the White House which is likely to accelerate ongoing US efforts at undermining and possibly dismantling the agency.

The implementation of the ban will have dire consequences for UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees that it serves in the OPT, but the exact effects are difficult to predict. This is both because Israel has not clearly indicated how the ban will be implemented and as the situation on the ground is volatile, with the Gaza ceasefire effective 19 January 2025 significantly changing dynamics. If fully implemented, it would amount to a first ever forced eviction of a UN agency by a UN Member State. Whilst at the time of writing, UNRWA continues to operate in all three affected areas, it is expected that the ban will be gradually implemented in varying ways starting with East-Jerusalem where, according to one of the two laws, UNRWA operations are now prohibited.

The legal, political and humanitarian implications of the ban, as well as their implications for the international refugee regime, have been well documented (see PRIO 2025 for an overview) and international pressure to prevent (further) implementation of the ban is continuing. While the international debate around the ban, for valid reasons, focuses on the humanitarian implications in Gaza, it is extremely important to also highlight UNRWA's health and educational role, which constitutes the core of the agency's operations and is much harder to replace than the emergency aspects of its work. This role must be protected with regard to rebuilding and reinstituting the basic education and primary health care system in Gaza once the war ends. This also extends to education and health services in the West Bank, including East-Jerusalem

1. Syria's Reintegration and the Challenges of Refugee Returnees.

The new political transition in Syria after the fall of Syria's Assad regime has offered new hopes and possibilities for many refugees to voluntarily return, despite Syria remaining deeply unsafe for returnees. According to a survey conducted by the UNHCR, over a quarter of the survey's participants expressed that they intended to return to Syria to rebuild their lives in the next 12 months (UNHCR, 2025). Most returnees will have nowhere to return to and limited resources to count on: the destruction of homes and critical infrastructure, widespread poverty, the risk of

resurgent violence are protracting the humanitarian crisis. Many refugees prefer to stay and avail themselves of the protection provided by the host state, whilst 60% of Syrian's would prefer a "go and see" visit before they make their final decision (UNHCR, 2025)

In the past years, Lebanon and Turkey, under mounting domestic pressure, have intensified deportations, often violating the principle of *non-refoulement* (Amnesty International, 2024).

Lebanon's political and economic crisis fueled a xenophobic narrative against Syrian refugees, prompting new legal restrictions, evictions, and violent enforcement measures (EEAS, 2024).

Jordan's stance on repatriation remains cautious, balancing diplomatic normalization with security concerns. Given these past hostilities and new challenges, any return initiatives must be predicated on robust international guarantees ensuring security, housing, and economic reintegration for returnees.

2. The Sudanese Crisis and Egypt's Overburdened Asylum System

Sudan's descent into civil war has triggered one of the fastest-growing refugee crises globally, with over 500,000 Sudanese fleeing into Egypt (UNHCR, 2024). Unlike previous waves of migration, the Egyptian government has imposed stringent visa requirements, significantly restricting asylum access. This marks a departure from Egypt's historic role as a transit and host country for refugees from Africa and the Middle East. The economic downturn, exacerbated by currency devaluation and soaring inflation, has led to increased social hostility towards refugees, particularly as the government prioritizes national economic stabilization over humanitarian obligations (Mixed Migration Centre, 2024).

Regional Cooperation and Strengthening Resilience in Host Countries

Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Beyond: Collective Approaches to Refugee Response

The MENA region is coping with new and protracted crises related to forced displacement. By mid-2024, there were 16.6 million forcibly displaced and stateless people in the region. (UNHCR, 2025).

The dimension of the refugee crisis in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and North African countries requires a collective approach for a comprehensive and effective regional response. While these countries have historically shown solidarity and resilience, they are now at the limits of their capacity to provide shelter, and basic services, including livelihoods, and opportunities for refugees. The complex political scenario along with volatile donor interest may represent a drive for further instability and displacement in the region.

Shared Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges MENA countries face are multifaceted: rising xenophobic discourses, deteriorating economic conditions, security concerns, and the persistent decline of international support, coupled with the inability of aid to keep pace with ever-growing needs. For instance, Jordan has demonstrated a capacity to allow social cohesion of refugees through initiatives like the *Jordan Compact*, which ties refugee employment to international economic support. However, the refugee populations still face immense challenges, such as restrictive employment regulations and an insufficient distribution of aid, which leave many refugees without access to sustainable

livelihoods. Lebanon, on the other hand, struggles with its deeply fragile political and economic state, which makes addressing the refugee crisis particularly complex. The formation of the new government under President Aoun has the potential to open serious dialogue on the fate of Syrian refugees. None of these challenges should overshadow the invaluable contributions that refugee populations have made to the country's resilience, from local economies to cultural exchanges.

The Case for Regional Cooperation

In these circumstances, Middle Eastern and North African countries must explore regional partnerships to manage and address the refugee crisis in ways that can bring mutual benefit to both refugees and host populations. This could involve creating regional frameworks for economic cooperation that allow for cross-border employment opportunities, joint infrastructure projects, and resource sharing. Efforts to increase regional diplomatic dialogue and regional refugee policy agreements, informed by international law and human rights norms, would create a more robust and unified regional strategy. The establishment of regional resettlement mechanisms that fairly distribute refugee populations based on a country's capacity and historical record could also alleviate the pressure on host countries.

Coordinating Policies Across the Mediterranean: The Impact of European Policies on Migration Trends in the MENA Region

European migration policies have had a profound effect on migration flows in the MENA region, influencing both refugee and migrant movements. The approach to migration by some EU member states has increasingly focused on externalizing border controls to countries like Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. These policies often prioritize deterrence over protection and respect of humanitarian principles, creating imbalances in how refugees and migrants are treated in the region.

The externalization of European border policies has exacerbated the pressure on MENA countries by incentivizing tighter controls, often resulting in harsher treatment of refugees, including detention, deportation, and lack of access to asylum procedures (European Union, 2022). Although financial assistance has been provided, it has often been insufficient or ineffectively distributed, leaving frontline states with unmanageable burdens. Moreover, the implementation of these policies often creates diplomatic tensions between European countries and host states, especially when political priorities diverge.

To address these issues, there must be a comprehensive reassessment of the EU's approach, balancing border security with international protection obligations. A greater focus on equitable responsibility-sharing, rather than just the externalization of asylum policies and procedures, would help establish a more sustainable and humane approach to managing migration flows from the MENA region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recognizing the fragility and the conflict-affected nature of the region, Middle Eastern host countries demand a recalibrated international response that prioritizes sustainable burden-sharing and human rights approaches. Europe, as a leading actor, must shift from a reactive containment strategy to proactive engagement, ensuring that frontline states receive more and adequate support. Without a structural transformation of the refugee governance paradigm, the region risks further instability, deepening the humanitarian crisis for millions of displaced individuals.

Strengthening International Responsibility Sharing and Support for Host Countries

The international community, particularly the EU, must increase financial commitments and humanitarian assistance to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and other frontline states. This support should not only cover basic humanitarian needs but also include long-term funding for infrastructure development, healthcare, and education for refugees and host communities alike. Financial packages should be targeted towards projects that enhance the self-reliance of refugee populations, such as vocational training, micro-finance programs, and local enterprise development. Furthermore, international funding must be more flexible, responsive to evolving crises, and structured to ensure timely access to resources.

Reforming European Migration Agreements: Human Rights as a Foundation

Reforming European migration agreements with MENA countries should ensure that all deals are grounded in international refugee and human rights law ~~protections~~. Rather than prioritizing deterrence, such agreements should focus on creating safe, legal pathways for asylum seekers and migrants. This includes scaling up resettlement programs, expanding family reunification opportunities, and supporting refugees who choose to remain in their regions of displacement with dignified living conditions. European countries should also invest in improving the asylum systems of frontline states, providing technical assistance to ensure that refugee registration, protection, and resettlement processes align with international legal standards.

Strengthening Regional Cooperation Mechanisms

The creation of regional frameworks for refugee management would significantly alleviate the burden on individual countries. MENA countries should collaborate on policies that encourage refugee integration, skills development, and cross-border employment opportunities. The establishment of a regional refugee council could help mediate disputes, share best practices, and coordinate responses to the refugee crisis. Such frameworks should also emphasize the development of common standards for the treatment of refugees, ensuring they receive equal protection across the region.

Protecting UNRWA

Israel's ban on UNRWA is a test of the international community's commitment to uphold the international humanitarian and refugee system. Failing to protect one UN agency will not only

detrimentally affect the Palestinians, but also make other institutions and the groups they are made to protect more vulnerable. Continuing to stand up against the UNRWA ban is therefore paramount, in the process also highlighting the critical importance of the agency for education and health services. At the same time, it is vital that all states and organizations involved in the Middle East work to ensure that humanitarian aid is distributed to those in need in Gaza and the West Bank and that funding and support to UNRWA continues.

Improving Refugee Legal Protections and Reducing Deportations

The principle of *non-refoulement*, which prohibits the return of refugees to countries where they face danger, must be rigorously upheld. (as per art. 33, ‘51 Refugee Convention). Host countries must implement robust asylum procedures that grant refugees legal status, access to work permits, and the right to live in dignity. States should develop clear pathways for legal residency and eventual naturalization, and, where necessary, adjust their immigration policies to allow for long-term settlement opportunities for refugees. Additionally, countries must cease deportation practices that violate human rights, ensuring that any return process is voluntary and conducted in conditions of safety.

Supporting local civil society and localization policies towards feasible and just solutions

To facilitate social cohesion in host countries as well as to allow for better strategies of safe and secure return, the role of local civil society is central and policies that reinforce it should be priorities. CBOs can guarantee the implementation of programs that address distorted narratives and prevent rising discrimination and social tensions between refugees and host communities by emphasizing the positive contributions of refugees to host societies. Social cohesion programs that promote understanding between refugees and host communities, including joint educational activities, cultural events, and community-building initiatives, can only be successful with the contribution of CBOs and their presence on the ground. Similarly, successful return strategies can be developed with the support of local organizations and their awareness of the challenges faced by refugees. Localization policies are fundamental in strengthening communities.

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