

Educating Syrian Refugees: Challenges Facing Host Countries

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Since the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011, more than 11 million Syrians have been displaced. More than [4.5 million](#) have fled to three neighboring countries: Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. [Lebanon](#) has taken in over a million Syrian refugees, swelling its population by 25%. Jordan has accepted over 600,000 refugees, increasing its population by 10%. The two million Syrian refugees now in Turkey have increased its population by 3% nation-wide, and between 10-20% in some local areas. These numbers are considered conservative as they include only registered Syrian refugees. This massive influx of refugees has created an education crisis for the host countries, as a large proportion of these refugees are school-aged children. However, this increased educational demand is not being met. As economic, political, and social influences continue to shape responses to the crisis, both host and wealthy countries in the region must recognize the permanency of refugees within their borders and work to develop sustainable long-term education services to refugee children.

Efforts to provide such services to refugee children have fallen short in two respects. First, [more than half of school-aged refugee children](#) are not attending formal education programs at all. Second, those who are enrolled generally receive substandard services. The governments of the host countries have worked diligently to provide education services to refugee children, but the political, economic and social structural realities of their respective countries have constrained their options and shaped responses, often in ways that shortchange refugee children.

The economies of the host countries are weak. Lebanon and Jordan had been struggling to provide high quality education to their own citizens even prior to the arrival of Syrian refugees; the refugee influx has further strained capacity. In Lebanon, the most seriously impacted of the three receiving countries, the number of Syrian refugees has expanded the number of students in public schools significantly. However, education budgets have not grown accordingly. Even with the support of international organizations, governments have found it difficult to find adequate space, facilities, and qualified teachers. In Lebanon and Jordan, most Syrian refugee students are concentrated in a small fraction of ministry schools. To accommodate these students, these schools have implemented a second, afternoon shift. In Turkey, the government relies heavily on international organizations to open separate schools for the refugee children. However, many cannot be served because of resource and facilities shortages.

Furthermore, the quality of education provided to refugee children in host countries continues to be a concern. [Studies](#) of Syrian refugee education in Jordan and Lebanon have found that second shifts tend to offer less instructional time and larger classes than first shifts. In

addition, second shift teachers tend to have less teaching experience than first shift teachers, are paid less, and lack training to address issues specific to refugees. The differences in the educational standards and quality of the two shifts result in inferior education for those in the second, weaker shift.

The political conditions in these countries also influence how education services are structured and delivered. Despite the fact that it takes refugees an average of 20 years to return to their homelands, the host countries will not publically acknowledge that the Syrian refugee crisis is a long-term issue. Leaders fear that conceding this would foment public discontent against the refugees or the government. Such discontent would [fuel existing religious and cultural differences](#) between host and refugee populations. In Lebanon, for example, most refugees are Sunni and many are settling in Shi'a areas, which raises fears of increased violence between Muslim sects. Christians in Lebanon feel threatened by the dramatic increases in the Muslim population; this perceived threat increases if Syrian refugees are being integrated into the population on a long-term basis. Similarly, in Jordan, where Palestinian refugees now make up more than half the population, and in Turkey, where nationalism is an enduring theme, integrating Syrian refugees might raise hackles. Given these fragile political balances, it is politically safer to provide Syrian refugee children with a separate education in their own schools or through second shifts. Integrated education might be perceived as a first step toward providing refugees with citizenship, and such a perception could have a de-stabilizing effect on host countries.

The social sentiment in the host countries also affects school climate and structure. Syrian refugees are sometimes derogated because of the circumstances from which they come. Studies have found that principal and teacher perceptions of refugee children affect their level of empathy and, in some instances, have led to [discriminatory treatment](#) of refugee children. Such studies also report instances of bullying of Syrian refugee students by host country students inside and outside schools. Furthermore, disadvantaged host country families feel resentful when they see or perceive refugee children receiving education services from international organizations that are not available to their own children. These social sentiments have encouraged separate education for refugee students.

Host governments and international organizations have been addressing refugee education issues with a short-term focus given limited resources and political concerns. But past experiences with other refugee groups strongly suggest that the Syrian refugees are not likely to return to Syria anytime soon. Education planning in the host countries should take a longer-term and more realistic view, which requires courage and sensitivity to the political, economic, and social conditions of each host country.

Irrespective of the actions host countries take in dealing with the possibility of permanency, they should stress to the public that this crisis is long term and that better-educated Syrians will benefit the host country, whether or not they are offered citizenship. Education will enable refugees to develop skills needed to contribute to the national economic development of host countries, while at the same time improving their impoverished situation. These skills are

transferable, and, upon return, would be critical to the development of their own country. To more effectively address the long term education needs of Syrian refugees and the burden placed on local school systems, host country governments could spread Syrian refugee children across more public schools instead of concentrating them in a small area. This might enable more effective integration of Syrian refugees, and provide better education services to both citizens and refugee students. Although language might be a barrier initially, many successful instructional models could be adopted to ensure the transitioning of students from instruction in their home language to the language of instruction of their host countries. Integration in schools might also promote unified identities and intergroup social cohesion that would benefit the host countries in the long run. Re-distributing Syrian refugee students might require transportation services. It might also mean that families would need to be re-located. Thus, student re-distribution would need to be discussed within a broader and longer-term context of dispersion with refugee family livelihood as a main consideration.

The political and social realities will no doubt limit what host countries can do to address Syrian refugee education. But the dimensions of this challenge call for a much wider response to help the host countries. Wealthy regional governments could share more of the responsibility of supporting refugee education with the current host countries so that an entire generation of Syrian children is not lost. This support should include more financial support to host countries and acceptance of more Syrian refugees. These resources would increase refugees' access to education and enable them to contribute to the creation and growth of the economies in the region.