Viable Futures
Insights from peer-to-peer research among Syrian youth in Jordan
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General summary

This report is based on just over one year of research during which a total of 38 Syrian and Jordanian youths conducted qualitative interviews with their Syrian peers in three locations in Jordan: Amman, Al-Salt and Irbid. This data was analyzed and possible ways forward for Syrian refugees and NGOs working in Jordan were discussed in workshops attended by these:
- 38 Syrian and Jordanian researchers
- 3 Danish researchers
- 2 Danish students
- a Jordanian project manager
- a Jordanian project assistant.

This report presents our findings on what Syrian youth see as the key obstacles and possibilities for creating viable futures for themselves in Jordan. It draws on 354 interviews with Syrian youth as well as analyses developed by our Syrian and Jordanian co-researchers during the workshops and in essays that they wrote after the data collection and workshops had been concluded. We highlight the main points raised in the interviews, discussions and essays, namely that the key obstacles for Syrian refugee youth in Jordan are access to education and employment, the pressures of being responsible for the survival of their families, and the lack of adequate and suitable NGO support.

Drawing on these insights, we suggest that Jordan and its regional and international partners should work together to secure development in the labour market and a relaxation on restrictions on Syrians’ rights to work in Jordan.

We also recommend that NGOs focus on identifying demands in the target population, for instance through relying on peer-to-peer research, and allocate 20% of all funding to employing Syrian refugees in projects and on non-project-based contracts – a move that would ensure greater trust between NGOs and the target group as well as channel funds and knowledge directly into the community.

This report should be read as one component of a triad of publications resulting from the Viable Futures project. For a fuller exploration of the perspectives of our Syrian and Jordanian co-researchers on the future for Syrian youth in Jordan, see our online publication Viable Futures: Syrian Articulations of the Protracted Crisis in Jordan. For more detailed discussion on our research design and peer-peer-research methodology, see our open access article Methods for the Future, Future for Methods[1].

The refugee situation in Jordan

Jordan hosted more than 670,000 registered Syrian refugees of whom 20 per cent were young people between the ages of 15 and 24.[2]

Jordan’s support for Syrian refugees has unfolded within a context of severe economic challenges and rising national debt.

With little to no hope that Syrians might be able to return to Syria in the foreseeable future, the Jordanian government has been working with partners such as the UN and the EU to secure ways forward for Jordan and for Syrian refugees in the country.


What we did.

In light of the situation for Syrian refugees in Jordan, in 2020, the Novo Nordisk Foundation allotted just over 5 million euros to projects that would investigate and suggest longer-term solutions to the challenges faced by Jordan.

These included the project Viable Futures: Near and long term prospects among Syrian youth in Jordan, hosted by the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. Viable Futures set out to explore how Syrian youth in Jordan plan for and work towards the future.

Drawing inspiration from NGO reports that highlight the need to understand the perspectives of the target group, we hypothesized that humanitarian efforts could be better designed if they supported strategies in which Syrian youths were themselves engaged.

There was therefore a need to understand these strategies and the possibilities and limitations that Syrian youths associated with them.

To conduct a study of target group perspectives, we engaged in classic qualitative fieldwork and in a collaboration with Turning Tables, Jordan through which we recruited as co-researchers a total of 38 Syrian and Jordanian youths living in Amman, Al-Salt or Irbid. Each of these youths (27 females and 11 males), received training in qualitative interviewing techniques and subsequently interviewed an average of ten young Syrians in the area where they lived. We then held workshops in which co-researchers, researchers, students and the Jordanian project team collaborated on analysing the collected interview material.

This method allowed us to create several forms of data of which we draw on three for this report. First, the 354 interviews with young Syrians in Jordan in which they talked about their current situation and their hopes and plans for the future. Second, the workshops during which new perspectives on the situation for Syrian refugees in Jordan emerged.

Third, the essays written individually by the co-researchers after interviewing ended, in which they give their thoughts on what they identified as the key findings of the project.
Reading the report

In the following, we highlight four specific areas that were particularly important for the young Syrians interviewed: family, work and education, NGOs, and the future.

- For each area we first draw out the main points from the 354 interviews with Syrian youth.
- We then present key comments and points of analysis made by our co-researchers in the form of direct quotations from their essays.
- Taken together these two forms of data illuminate what we see as the central challenges and opportunities for young Syrians in Jordan.
- Lastly, we summarise the main recommendations of the project, which draw on both the interview and essay data and additional insights formulated at our workshops.

A central caveat:

The collected material covers three different local contexts in Jordan.

The general trends that cut across these geographical differences indicate that specific challenges are shared by many young Syrians in Jordan.

It should be noted, however, that the 354 Syrian youths interviewed for the project were not selected using any methods to secure representativeness.

As such, the quantitative data we present on their situation does not necessarily speak to that of young Syrian refugees in Jordan more generally.
Family and opportunities

Around 95% of the interviewed youths were in Jordan with their families. covering:
- 129 out of 139 in Amman
- 101 out of 103 in Al-Salt
- 106 out of 112 in Irbid

This meant that most of these young people were still living with their parents and/or extended family, the very few exceptions being those who had already settled with a spouse.

When asked about their experiences with their parents, all replies were extremely positive. Words like “exemplary” and “very supportive” and even “essential” were repeated across all interviews in all locations.

The interviewed youths explained that their parents supported them socially and emotionally, but also that many life decisions were made by their parents.

Some co-researchers took a less positive view of the role of family in the lives of young Syrians in Jordan.

In their written essays they argued that some parents were placing restrictions on young adults that hindered them from forging better futures for themselves. These restrictions were often gender specific, with young men being asked to forego education in favour of work to help support the family, and young women being expected to marry and raise a family rather than to pursue education and employment outside the home.
"Through my work as a researcher and interviewer conducting fieldwork with Syrian youth, I figured out that the cause of most of the problems that the youth face is their families. […] They said that their families supported them with not only financial but also psychological support. Their parents did support some of their choices and opinions, but for us as researchers and interviewers, we did not consider that support sufficient. […] Most parents required something from their children to support their family, whether that was to help financially to better their living conditions or to support a sibling in getting an education. Some Syrian youth are exposed to patriarchal authority, which affects their decision making greatly. That and the lack of psychological and family support make these youth desire to emigrate.”[4]

"Most of the people I met did not want to stay in Jordan for several reasons. […] They thought that if they emigrated, they would have good opportunities in education. Due to patriarchalism, tradition and norms, many of the youth here in Jordan are forced to leave school. Fathers have their young boys leave school and work to help them secure the needs of the family. With girls, their fathers will marry them off at an early age.”

"One young woman was forced to marry at the age of 16, marginalised by her family. She wanted to finish her studies and achieve her dreams, but her family stopped all her dreams and ambitions by marrying her off at an early age.”

[4] For the full versions of the texts from which this and other quotations from our co-researchers are cited, see Viable Futures: Syrian Articulations of the Protracted Crisis in Jordan.
Work, education, and rights

Accessing higher education and employment in the formal sector are key challenges for Syrians in Jordan. Even when asked about informal work (i.e., work without a formal contract or access to social security), levels of employment among the interviewed youths were low.

Employment:
- in Irbid was just over 24%
- in Amman 20%
- in Al-Salt 33%.

These numbers can be compared to an overall level of employment among Jordanian youth of just over 50% (in early 2021).[5]

Studying was a goal for many, but only 7% of interviewees in Irbid, 4% in Amman and 7% in Al-Salt said they were students.

Of those who were employed, more than half (50%) stated that they liked their jobs. However, several co-researchers highlighted in their essays that the absence of workers’ rights was a key challenge for Syrian youth in Jordan.
“When it comes to work, Syrians face many difficulties obtaining a contract and are met with low wages. Many young people have been forced to leave school to work and support their families.”

“A big issue is that they cannot find a job with a contract or with fixed terms to guarantee their rights. Thus, Syrians work in day labour jobs where they are paid daily. They know that this is not an official job and that it cannot secure them a better future, but they are working to secure a peaceful life and to not depend on other people or alms. They are also aware that this kind of job means that the boss or owner can fire them at any time without any prior warning, and that they are not given their full rights. Sometimes owners exploit Syrians because they are well aware that they are very dependent on their job to secure their basic needs. Syrians do not consider these jobs sufficient to secure their future in Jordan, so most young Syrians want to migrate to foreign countries to secure a better future.”

“We all have our rights. My wish is that Syrian people will also obtain their rights. It would be better if they were treated equally at work. There should be a law giving Syrians rights so that they do not suffer under injustice from their employers, as well as a competent authority protecting their rights at work to guarantee non-discrimination. Some of them are rejected from job interviews due to their appearance or not having a university degree when it is not relevant. This affects their confidence and self-esteem, and they lose hope. We as interlocuters do not see this as just.”
The role of NGOs

Experiences with NGOs were mixed. Although many young Syrians across all three locations had received aid or believed NGOs could be helpful, more said the opposite. Central to their criticisms of NGOs were the observations that NGOs did not secure basic needs for Syrians and that aid was distributed unequally and with no clear criteria.

The hopes they associated with NGOs were securing access to education and training. While particular emphasis was placed on securing access to higher education, they also mentioned the need for training in skills that were useful in an urban context – for instance creative skills for online work or beauty technician skills – and not only those related to manual labour.

In Amman,
- 43% said that NGOs could be of help
- 43% said they could not.
- 14% of the interviewees either did not know or gave no response.

Most of the youth who elaborated on how organisations could help felt that they should help and be more active in the field of education and for the obtainment of degrees. Only a handful suggested direct cash assistance.

In Al-Salt,
the question was framed a bit differently. Here we asked whether NGOs had already been of help.
- 58% answered that they had not been of help,
- 37% said they had and 5% did not know.

When those who had received assistance were asked how the NGOs had been of help, the majority said that they had provided food coupons. Many of the interviewees described having lost contact with the organisations once the distribution of coupons or food had stopped.

In Irbid,
- 20% answered that they depended on NGOs
- 80% said that they did not.

The vast majority of the first group gave food coupons as an example of the assistance they had received. Others mentioned being helped with registration through eye scanning, and a few also mentioned that the “Norwegians” and “Danes” – which is how they referred to the Norwegian and Danish refugee councils (NRC/DRC) – had helped them register for the purpose of being able to rent a house or flat.
“Because of the abundance of their talk and promises, we thought that they would help us. But if they loved us, they would not let our youth work half a day to secure water and food. I did not find anyone from among our people who liked them. Everybody was upset and pessimistic and most were saying: “If all the aid was coming to us, we would not see any poor Syrians.”

“Through our research, we have witnessed a loss of trust and credibility in these organisations among a large proportion of refugees due to the lack of real and tangible support on the ground. Most of these organisations are more concerned with their own interests and those of their staff than with refugees. They only work to reach certain targets and increase those for the sake of their reputation. But they do not care about the quality of what they provide. [...] It has reached a point where refugees have become unable to tell which organisation is real because their number is becoming greater than the services provided. There is a lack of monitoring and follow up on them and their work.”

“There is a need for [NGOs to provide] awareness and guidance programs for parents and children about the importance of education for the future, on how to plan and make decisions, and on how to set goals to expand their horizons and increase their awareness.”
Visions of the future

While dreams and ambitions for the future varied from one individual to the next, a key question that most young Syrians deliberated on was whether they should stay in Jordan or attempt to travel abroad. Among the interviewed youths it was striking that while the vast majority of young Syrians in Amman wanted to leave Jordan the trend was reversed in Irbid and Al-Salt.

In Amman,
- 28% answered that they thought they would stay in Jordan,
- 72% thought they would leave.
Among the latter, 77% said they would go to Canada, America or Europe, 5% said Turkey and 15% said “anywhere.” The remaining 3% said they would return to Syria.

In Irbid,
- by contrast, 93% thought they would stay,
- only 7% said they thought they would leave.

In Al-Salt,
- 12% thought they would leave
- 88% said they would stay.

One possible explanation for such a striking difference between responses among those living in Amman and those living in Irbid and Al-Salt is that Syrians living outside the capital and/or close to the border with Syria are able to draw on stronger networks of tribal and family ties for their everyday survival.[6]
“Most of the participants who I met during this project think that there is no future in Jordan, so they consider emigrating and imagine their future to be outside this country. This brings us back to the lack of scholarships to complete their education, and their limitation to very few fields. Even if Syrians are able to complete their education, they cannot find employment. […] Even Jordanians cannot find work after graduation. So how can Syrians?

“When I interviewed one 25-year-old woman, she told me that […] she saw her future as being here and did not want to go elsewhere. She was seeking to obtain Jordanian citizenship [because] her Syrian citizenship was creating great obstacles in her life. She said: ‘Every time I apply for a job or start my own project, the answer is: You are Syrian and not qualified for this. There is no registered national number in your name.’”

“There is this fear of, what next? You know, Syrian youth might be able to get a university degree, but they can’t get a job. That the Jordan Compact[1] is really only about getting work in agriculture, in construction, in some of these factories that produce clothing in the economic zones. This is not something that provides you with a future. So that’s problematic. I think the future is going to be some kind of comprehensive plan whereby the Jordanians somehow relax a little bit, allow some pathways to other occupations that do not undermine their own labour force. And then we see onward migration.”

[1] The Jordan compact is an agreement between the EU and Jordan stipulating eased access to European markets for certain Jordanian products and economic support in return for issuing more work permits for Syrian refugees and easing their way into employment in certain sectors.

Recommendations for the future

The key obstacles for Syrian youth in Jordan remain access to education and access to employment in the formal sector where it is possible to obtain a living wage and social security. Three factors stand in the way of such access:

1. The legal restrictions on Syrians’ right to work.
2. The general exhaustion of the Jordanian labour market.
3. The lack of affordable education opportunities that open pathways towards employment.

Politically, the Syrian and Jordanian youth involved in the Viable Futures project hope for a boost to the Jordanian economy in terms of job creation. For Syrians in particular, a relaxation of Jordanian laws restricting Syrian opportunities in the labour market would also open new avenues for young people to venture into a variety of professions. Given that the challenges of finding employment are shared by Syrian and Jordanian youth, such developments would require a concerted effort on the part of both Jordan and its regional and international partners to secure development in a variety of sectors.

At the NGO level, we suggest that existing attempts to devise demands-based projects should be strengthened.

One way to do this is to involve the target group in an initial needs analysis and thereby work towards identifying pragmatic ways of finding relevant work that allow Syrians to manoeuvre within the given political circumstances.

However, projects also need a longer-term strategy for following up with participants after the main project cycle ends.

• One option is to employ Syrians in NGOs,
• Another is to create projects with an exit plan that involves the creation of more work for the target group.

For all strategies, we suggest that 20% of funding should be earmarked for employing the target group on both a project and a long-term basis.
“When we’re talking about a project, the organisation should have three Syrian people, or four, to join this project. This makes other Syrian refugees feel more confident about the organisation. They will feel that they have a good relationship with it.”

“[We should be doing] demand-based programming that is delivering twenty-first century skills that are applicable on the work market, then creating a viable and sustainable business plan where you can sustain the jobs.”

“When asked how organisations can help you build your future, one person replied: ‘I do not want help, I only need asylum and resettlement to any country where I have rights and I will build my future by myself.’”

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