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Causes of family separation and barriers to reunification: Syrian refugees in Jordan

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Since 2011, the war in Syria has resulted in the displacement of 12.2 million people. Over 5.6 million have fled Syria to seek asylum in neighbouring countries, while 6.6 million have been internally displaced. Family separation, with significant psychological, social and economic implications, is a key concern for those who flee violence and cross international borders. This qualitative study sought to understand the causes of separation among Syrian families in Jordan and the obstacles to family reunification. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 85 Syrian refugee families identified as having separated family members. We present critical moments during migration when family separation occurs: (1) while fleeing Syria, (2) while residing in Jordan and (3) pre-existing separation due to work or travel that was exacerbated by the conflict. We also highlight the factors that perpetuate separation among families, preventing or delaying them from reuniting. These findings may help to inform more humane family reunification practices as well as identify future research and learning needs.

Background

Today, the world is witnessing the rise of an unprecedented number of displaced persons; according to the UNHCR's most current figures, there are 70.8 million people globally who have been forcibly displaced (UNHCR 2019a, 2020). Of those, 25.9 million are refugees and 3.5 million are asylum seekers. The majority of refugees are from Afghanistan, South Sudan and Syria (UNHCR 2019a), with the present conflict in Syria contributing to the largest refugee crisis since World War II (Cumming-Bruce 2019).

Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has displaced 12.2 million people (UNHCR 2018). Over 5.6 million people have fled Syria to seek asylum in neighbouring countries, while 6.6 million people have been internally displaced (UNHCR 2018, 2019c). Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt host the most Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2019c) and Turkey currently hosts the largest refugee population in the world, with 3.6 million Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2017c, 2019c). However, in proportion to their population size, both Jordan and Lebanon have the greatest numbers of refugees (UNHCR 2017c). There are an estimated 1.26 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, although only 662,010 have been registered as such (UNHCR 2019c). Among Syrian refugees in Jordan, 18 percent live in camps, while the majority live in rural, urban or semi-urban areas. Most refugees are concentrated in four of Jordan's governates: Amman (29.5 percent), Mafraq (24.6 percent), Irbid (20.8 percent) and Zarqa (14.4 percent) (UNHCR 2019d).

Although refugees face innumerable obstacles, family separation is a key concern for those who flee violence and cross international borders (Ressler *et al*. 1998; Stark *et al*. 2016; Beaton *et al*. 2018; McNatt and Boothby 2018). Children separated from their families are more at risk for labour and sex exploitation (UNHCR 2007; Lay and Papadopoulos 2009; Bianchini 2011), as well as food insecurity and malnutrition (International Committee of the Red Cross 2004). Additionally, the trauma of separation has been shown to negatively impact growth and cognitive development in some children, limiting their ability to reach their full potential (Ajudokovic and Ajukovic 1983; Garbino and Kostelny 1996; Fazel *et al*. 2012; Bronstein *et al*. 2013; Stark *et al*. 2016). Among Syrian refugees who are registered in Jordan, more than one-third (36.5 percent) are separated from a member of their family, which has notable implications in a Syrian culture that places significant value on family (Barakat 1993; UNHCR 2017b; Joseph 2018). Extended family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles often play prominent roles in raising children. Females often remain in their parents' homes until marriage, regardless of age. This is also true, to a lesser extent, for male youth (Joseph 2018). Studies in other humanitarian emergencies have shown that family separation among refugees is associated with psychological distress and physical health challenges (Cécile *et al*. 2001; Nickerson *et al*. 2011; Löbel 2020). Additionally, the stress of family separation has been associated with diminished ability to obtain employment, leading to increased economic hardship (Wilmsen 2016). Similar findings have emerged from recent studies of the impact of family separation on Syrian refugees (Beaton *et al*. 2018; McNatt and Boothby 2018; Löbel 2020).

According to the United Nations Refugee Convention, there are three durable solutions for refugees: local integration, repatriation and resettlement to a third country (UNHCR 2017c). However, these options are not feasible for a majority of the world's refugees. While host countries like Jordan have accepted large numbers of refugees on humanitarian grounds, they do not allow local integration as a durable solution. The challenges refugees face when living in host countries are often favourable to the dangers of repatriation, as is currently the case for Syrians (Amr *et al.* 2013; Chulov 2018; Marks 2019; Schwarz 2019). Finally, resettlement to a third country is a neglectable option, as less than 1 percent of refugees globally are resettled to a third country (UNHCR 2017a, 2019b). This reality has led the UNHCR to advocate for family reunification as a complimentary, durable solution pathway (UNHCR 2017a).

Legal and procedural barriers, however, would need to be overcome for family reunification to be realized. In many countries, refugees can only apply for family reunification if they have residency status, which may take years to achieve (UNHCR 2001; Reach 2017). Similarly, in Europe, if an individual does not have full refugee status, it is more challenging to apply for family reunification (Costello and Groenendijk 2017). While the UN Refugee Convention establishes the right to family reunification, a number of host countries with the largest number of Syrian refugees did not sign the Convention and therefore do not recognize a refugee's right to family reunification (Sadek 2013). Furthermore, the legal definition of family under international law does not match the functional realities of family life for Syrians and other refugee groups, which includes children over the age of 18 and extended family members (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2014; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2017). In addition to policy and legal barriers, there are other documented obstacles to achieving family reunification, including the lack of documentation that proves relationships, costs of procedures and travel, language barriers, limited access to embassies and consulates, and time constraints (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2014; Actionaid International 2017; Nicholson 2018). Finally, while global data on the incidence of family reunification is not systematically collected, the numbers are believed to be low and currently unavailable for most Syrian refugees in Jordan with family members in other asylum countries (Beaton *et al.* 2018).

Accordingly, this study sought to understand the causes of separation among Syrian families in Jordan as well as the barriers to family reunification. Family has been defined broadly, including both 'nuclear' and 'extended' family, to account for the fact that family life is rooted in relationships. A broad definition of a family unit is needed to accommodate the peculiarities in any given refugee's reality (UNHCR 2001; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2017). Through the analysis of qualitative data, this study presents critical moments before, during and after flights from Syria, when family separation occurs, and highlights the factors that perpetuate separation among families. These findings may help to inform more humane family-reunification practices and identify future research and learning needs.

Methods

A joint UNHCR–Columbia University report examining the impacts of family separation on Syrian refugees in Jordan was released in 2018 (McNatt and Boothby 2018). Using the same qualitative data, this study specifically explores the causes of family separation for Syrian refugees living in Jordan and obstacles to reunification. To collect this data, a demographic analysis of the UNHCR database was undertaken to obtain basic information about family separation among refugees, who were then randomly sampled. In addition, a policy review of the top 10 countries hosting Syrian refugees was conducted to better understand their refugee family reunification policies and to determine how accessible that information was to Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Sample

Eighty-five semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with Syrian refugee families in Jordan. An initial random sample of 220 registered refugees was supplied by the UNHCR. This sample only included refugees who were living in Jordan, over 18 years old, who had separated family members in Europe, a country in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and/or Syria. From this list, 85 participants were selected using purposeful, non-random sampling. Refugee families that experienced nuclear-family separation (spouses and children under 18) in Europe and the GCC were oversampled to further understand the experiences in this specific group. The final sample was nationally representative of the Syrian refugee population in Jordan for the following indicators: (1) dual vs. female heads of household, (2) geographic diversity across Jordan and (3) camp vs. non-camp residence (Table 1). In each household, a main respondent was contacted for an

Table 1

Participant Demographics

	N (%)
Total	85 (100%)
Head of household	
Dual head	38 (44%)
Female-only	32 (38%)
Male-only	15 (18%)
Residential setting	
Urban setting	68 (80%)
Northern region	17 (20%)
Central region	42 (49%)
Southern region	9 (11%)
Camp setting	17 (20%)
Za'atari camp	13 (15%)
Azraq camp	4 (5%)

interview; however, the presence and participation of other family members were welcomed.

Data Collection

In August 2017, Jordanian interviewers conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews in Arabic with Syrian refugees across Jordan. Participants were given a choice to have the interviews in their home or at the UNHCR office in Amman. Seventy-three interviews took place in their homes, while only 12 took place at the UNHCR office. If the participants consented, the interviews were recorded. Detailed written notes were taken when participants chose not to be recorded. Interviewers used an interview guide that examined the following topics regarding family separation: (1) family structure, (2) the process of separation and migration, (3) efforts to reunify, (4) life in Jordan, (5) parent and child dynamics and (6) perceptions about future reunification. Each topic contained one question and multiple probes. However, the interview structure was flexible so that narratives could form.

National and international researchers from a variety of fields constituted the research team. Members of the research team had backgrounds in social work, forced migration, epidemiology, health systems, child protection, population health, psychology and medicine. The research team attended training and orientation in Amman, Jordan. This 3-day training covered qualitative methods, confidentiality, informed consent and interview skill-building. Additionally, researchers participated in a 2-hour UNHCR orientation on the refugee situation and current response in Jordan. The Institutional Review Board at Columbia University Medical Center in New York, US, the Jordanian Ministry of Interior, and the Institutional Review Board at King Hussein Cancer Center in Amman, Jordan approved all research procedures. The Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University funded the research.

Data Analysis

A debrief worksheet was completed by the interviewers directly after the interview to reflect on the interview experience and content. An external vendor transcribed and translated the recorded transcripts from Arabic into English; all identify information was removed. Qualitative principles of the constant comparative method informed the approach to coding (Glaser 1965). Seven transcripts were read by seven researchers who all independently developed themes, creating the initial thematic structure. After the full research team had read an additional three transcripts, the initial themes were refined and a codebook was created. Dedoose (version 7.6.21) was utilized to code and analyse the transcripts. The UNHCR database provided information such as demographics, date of arrival and level of family separation. This information was triangulated during interviews for confirmation. For quantitative analysis, numerical and categorical data was subsequently coded. To further investigate the causes of separation for Syrian families, the excerpts coded 'Reasons for Separation' were analysed. From the analysis,

critical moments of separation were identified. The analysis also revealed a number of barriers to reunification.

Results

Overview

Family separation occurred throughout the process of fleeing Syria and taking refuge in a new country. The first key moment of separation occurred while fleeing Syria; 60 percent of respondents experienced separation during their initial escape from the country. Some left family behind to make a home in a neighbouring country like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Often, elderly parents were separated from their children who had gone ahead to make a path for the rest of the family. In many cases, family members were separated in multiple different countries, depending on the time at which they had left Syria and what resources were available to them. Many found that attempts to join their family in Jordan—from Syria or a neighbouring country—were not successful, particularly as the conflict progressed.

The second moment of separation occurred after residing in Jordan for a period of time. Families would settle in and feel physically safe, but then begin to experience the pressures of expensive housing and healthcare, and limited employment opportunities. Of the families interviewed, 43.5 percent made a second decision to separate while living in Jordan. Some moved away from family within the country of Jordan to find new sources of income, others sent family members to a third location such as Turkey or Europe to look for a better way of life and still others returned to Syria find family or protect their homes.

A final key moment of separation was endured when families who were living apart prior to the conflict for work, travel or education experienced unexpected separation when the conflict began; 28.2 percent of respondents had a family

Table 2

Categories of Separation Experienced by Participants

	N (%)
Separated when leaving Syria	51 (60.0%)
Family member stayed in Syria	42 (49.4%)
Separated family member was unable to join family in Jordan	13 (15.3%)
Family members left Syria and went to different places	22 (25.9%)
Separated once in Jordan	37 (43.5%)
Family member returned to Syria	13 (15.3%)
Family member went to a different location in Jordan	9 (10.6%)
Family member went to a third country	23 (27.1%)
Separated prior to the conflict	24 (28.2%)

Values do not add to total respondent number (N = 85) as participants may have shared more than one family separation experience.

member working or studying in another country when the conflict began whom they had not been able to reunite with (Table 2). Respondents identified key factors that perpetuated their separation by preventing them from reuniting with their families. Unclear reunification processes, documentation issues and exorbitant costs were some of the main barriers to reunification.

Separated when Leaving Syria

Sixty percent of respondents were separated from a family member while leaving Syria. There were many factors that families considered when deciding to stay or leave Syria. Some left to escape the physical threats and danger of the conflict. Others chose to stay because of their ties to their homeland and economic livelihood. Different priorities resulted in a range of decisions and determined whether a person stayed in Syria or left. As a result, the majority of respondents experienced separation when they left Syria.

Family member stayed in Syria Many families in Jordan had a family member who remained in Syria. Some did not want to leave their homes and livelihoods, and others were afraid of the unknowns of life in a new country where they did not have any community. Respondents described why some of their family members would not leave Syria:

> They will not come here [Jordan]. They will not come and leave their cattle. They say that they would rather die than leave. This is the only thing they think about. It is impossible for them to come here. Their habit is to stay in their place (Male-only head of household).

> M. is not a man who makes a decision quickly. He cannot leave everything and go easily. I think he does not have the ability to make decision[s] so easily. He sees that coming here [Jordan] will cause him problems, and there were more problems in Syria that is why he stayed there. My two sisters did not want to come with us—they say we are born here and will die here. Everyone has his own opinion (Dual head of household).

Some women fled Syria with their children while their husbands stayed, which often resulted in a strained marriage or divorce. Women explained how they prioritized their children's safety and decided to leave Syria without their husbands:

> My husband didn't want us to leave. I told him that even if he doesn't leave with us, I'm going to leave with the children. I'm going to save my children. I couldn't bare the sight of dead young men (Female-only head of household).

> 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).

However, others chose to stay in Syria with their families, while their siblings and parents fled. Respondents discussed how their daughters or sisters were unable to join them in Jordan because they had to stay with their husbands or they had to take care of their young children:

> My daughter, who is now in Syria, cannot come to Jordan. Her husband was arrested by the Syrian authorities, and she and the children were left alone. Then the Syrian authorities released him. Now he is serving with the Syrian army (just in case- he can't leave . . . it's impossible). She is now 23 years old . . .. And she is the only member of my family in Syria (Dual head of household).

Because the journey to Jordan was dangerous and challenging, elderly or sick relatives usually remained in Syria. Many men remained in Syria to join resistance causes, maintain business or because they feared being turned away or arrested at the border because of tighter security for men of fighting ages. Respondents explained how the possibility of arrest and conscription into the army deterred some of their family members from leaving Syria:

> Well, on our way here, we had to stop at checkpoints. Daraa was not completely freed from the regime, and whenever they caught someone at a checkpoint, they used to take him away. I was worried about that. I asked him not to come with me—that was the case for everyone. Only women and children ran away; they never brought men with them (Female-only head of household).

> The other daughter N. is in Damascus, in a place called [unintelligible]. She has two sons, and she can't escape. Because as soon as they reached the borders, they got arrested. She has a 12-year son called W. The other son is called G. As soon as they get out, they will get arrested. The army is now taking men that are up to 50 years old to the reserves (Dual head of household).

Family members remained in Syria for many reasons. Some wanted to finish their studies. Others were waiting for a loved one who was missing. Some men were fighters in the Syrian army and it was impossible for them to flee Syria. One mother explained why she had to leave some of her children in Syria when she came to Jordan:

> My son cannot come, because he was serving in the army and does not have an ID. And my daughters are with their husbands. They do not have the right to choose. And I have three single girls. I brought them and came (Dual head of household).

Separated family member was unable to join family in Jordan Many families separated in Syria and planned on being reunited in Jordan later; however, they were ultimately unable to be reunited. Denied applications and issues with documentation were common barriers to people meeting their families. Additionally, it became much more difficult for people to reunite with their families when Jordan closed its borders to Syrian refugees. One woman described how her family members attempted to come to Jordan, but were refused entry:

Respondent 1: They went [to the Syrian/Jordanian border] and tried really hard. They stayed in Tell Shihab for a long time.
Interviewer: It did not work out?
Respondent 1: It did not work out. Then they said it is better to go back to their homes.
Respondent 3: Many people tried and then returned.
Respondent 1: Plenty of people tried to come here [Jordan], but they could not (Female-only head of household).

The fear of the journey to Jordan also deterred people from joining their families. One respondent discussed how he was afraid to encourage his family to travel to Jordan because the journey was dangerous. He stated:

> As for them coming here—I'm talking about myself, I don't know about others, but personally I can't ask them [his family] to come because it's a decision I will be held accountable for in front of God. Let me give you an example, when I came here with my sister and her children and my wife and our children, I said to my sister, 'Please sister, tell me—are you leaving out of your own will? I'm your brother, but I have nothing to do with your decision, something bad could happen on the road.' So, my brother-in-law –her husband– said that every person shall be held accountable for his own decision. Because, in order for me to suggest something, I have to be sure of it; for example if I told my brother to come, how would I be sure that nothing bad will happen on the road, if something happened I might never be able to forgive myself for the rest of my life. Am I right? (Dual head of household).

Family members left Syria and went to different places As the crisis in Syria escalated, there was insufficient time to coordinate with family members while fleeing. People escaped to whichever neighbouring country they had access to and thought was the safest, which resulted in families being split up across countries. One respondent discussed travelling to Jordan with his wife and young children and being separated from his parents, his siblings and his siblings' families in the process:

> However, it was out of our hands. Every girl goes with her husband—not with her brother, this is natural. As for men, everyone goes to a place where he finds that it is safe. I came here—every one of us had his own opinion. We did not expect that it would go on for that long. We decided to run away with our families and then ask about each other. The conclusion was every one of us in a different place (Dual head of household).

When people fled Syria at different times, it was challenging for families to stay together. When the conflict first began, male family members often left first to find work or to avoid being conscripted into the Syrian army. Some left Syria and went to a neighbouring country, like Egypt, Lebanon or a country in the GCC, while the rest of their family remained. As the conflict escalated and their families also left Syria, it was difficult for the families to migrate to the same country as the male family member. One woman explained how one of her sons had fled Syria into Lebanon, so he would not have to serve in the army:

> *Interviewer:* So, for your son in Lebanon, why did he decide to go to Lebanon?
> *Respondent:* It was faster. I mean, it was closer from Hama to Lebanon. And they allowed them to enter immediately, using only the ID. Not like here, you need a passport for Jordan. He did not have a passport. And they recruited him as a reserve soldier, because my son served in the army. They called him for the reserve, and he fled to Lebanon (Female-only head of household).

Separated Once in Jordan

Once inside Jordan, although families would settle and feel physically safe, they would begin to experience the pressures of expensive housing and healthcare with limited employment opportunities; 43.5 percent of respondents were separated from a family member while living in Jordan.

Family member returned to Syria For many, life in Jordan was challenging. Housing and healthcare were expensive, there were few employment opportunities and people missed their homes, livelihood and family in Syria. There was no option to visit Syria: if a person left Jordan, they would not be allowed to re-enter. Some chose to return to Syria to be reunited with family members who were unable to leave Syria, often leaving behind some family in Jordan. One man in Jordan described how his sister and her husband returned to Syria to be with their parents and her husband's family:

> *Respondent:* Yes. She left with her husband two years ago.
> *Interviewer:* What was the reason?
> *Respondent:* Frankly, it was the same reason behind my mother leaving with the children. It was because of the separation. They got to the stage where they could not stand the situation anymore.
> *Interviewer:* So, it was her husband's family?
> *Respondent:* Also for her separation from her mother and father (Male-only head of household).

A woman explained that her sister and her husband had stayed in Syria, and her brother had left Jordan and returned to Syria to be with them:

> She was tired from the fear and horror. But her husband was not convinced of coming here. He said he wants to die in his country. My brother returned to her and they reunited with each other (Dual head of household).

Others were unable to get a permit to work in Jordan. One respondent explained how her husband had been sent back to Syria because he was caught working in Jordan without a permit:

> 'Yes, he tried for more than a year to come back here, but there was no way. The government said that it's prohibited for him to enter back again' (Female-only head of household).

Additionally, some people did not like living in Jordan or the refugee camps, so they returned to Syria.

Family Member Went to a Different Location in Jordan Respondents found that life in Jordan was more expensive than living in Syria and finding employment was difficult. Because of these challenges, people moved within Jordan to where they could find work and afford to live. This resulted in families being further separated and living in different regions of Jordan. Some respondents discussed how they could not afford to support their family outside of the refugee camps, so their family lived in the camp while they worked and lived outside of the camp. Similarly, male family members would travel around Jordan looking for work, so they could support their family. One woman described how her son was smuggled out of the refugee camp to find work:

> So, my son put up the tent and organized it. And there were only a few people who had access to electricity. My son bought us an electric stove, so we could cook. And that's how slowly we made a home of our own in the tent. We also received blankets, food. After making sure that everything is in place, my son told me that he can't carry on living this way. When I told him why? He said that he wanted to leave and find work. He said that he isn't used to staying still and do nothing. He then told me to look after his sisters and his brother because I have to work for a month at least in order to have money (Female-only head of household).

Additionally, documentation issues made it difficult for people to leave the refugee camps. One respondent described how she and her children were separated from her husband because he was not permitted to leave the refugee camp:

> We came before him actually, and we left the camp shortly, after five days only, and continued to Irbid. Twenty-four days later, he arrived at the camp. He arranged the IDs for the children and me, and I added him to my papers, and we left. Since we had our necessary UNHCR documents for verification. But he had no idea that his papers would stay there. So, we were out, and he stayed in (Dual head of household).

Family Member Went to a Third Country Many respondents explained that they did not feel like they had a future in Jordan. Many refugees could not get a permit to work in Jordan and working without a permit could lead to arrest or unfair compensation. Therefore, financial need and lack of employment and education opportunities motivated families to send a male family member to a third country, often Germany, in order to find employment and support their family in Jordan. The journey to another country was dangerous and risky, so it was often not feasible for them to bring their entire family. Many respondents discussed how they planned on following their husbands, brothers and sons to the third country once they had established residency and could apply for family reunification. Women explained why their husbands had been smuggled to Germany:

> First thing, he did not stay in Jordan because he could not find a job. I mean, we suffered a lot. We are a family of four. It is five with my husband- six. He was an employee in a place here . . . and they fired him later. So, we stayed a whole year with no work, and [unintelligible], 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, and we are still waiting (Female-only head of household).

> Here there isn't any future for the boy or the girl. It was better for him to immigrate to find a future for his sons and daughters and to live in a house which had everything. In which there are electric machines, furniture and everything that's important in our life. Everyone prefers to have all what they need in their home, not to live only in a caravan or on mats. We all need to improve our lives. We try to immigrate for these reasons. Also for our children's education and for their future. For example, my daughter doesn't study. She is 17, isn't that so bad? My other daughter doesn't study either, this is sad. My son also needs to work because he needs dialysis, can he do so while his wife is going to have a baby? He doesn't have a job either. The baby also needs care. He needs to work when he gets older. One prefers to immigrate for all these reasons and not stay in the camp (Female-only head of household).

Integrating children into schools in Jordan was also difficult. Parents explained how their children experienced bullying and were not performing as well academically as they had been in Syria. Some respondents sent their children, usually sons, to a third country, so they could get a better education. One woman discussed the decision to smuggle her son, who was in eighth grade, to Germany for school:

> A. wasn't in a good situation here in Jordan, he was—education is hard here—I used to send him to school, and he used to come back home two hours later. His grades were too low. He was a top student in Syria—but here, it didn't work . . .. He used to fight with other children daily and come back home with ripped clothes and a ripped bag—you know there are bad children. A person usually worries about such things, especially when he's a stranger. I said—he said it would be better for him to go and to study there—I asked about it and everyone said that Germany is great for education, so I let him go, and I sent him there. But I didn't know it involved traveling by the sea—I swear I didn't know (Female-only head of household).

In some cases, single family members, usually daughters, were married and moved to a third country to live with their spouse, while the rest of their family remained in Jordan. One respondent explained:

> My children too, they came with us. We had nine children. Two of them got married, one of them is here and the other moved to Lebanon with her husband, then to Saudi. Now seven of them are living with me now in the UNHCR registration, three boys and four girls (Dual head of household).

Separated Prior to the Conflict

For families that were living separately prior to the conflict, the degree of separation was exacerbated when the conflict began. Before the conflict, some male family members worked or studied for part of the year in a neighbouring country, like Egypt, Lebanon or a country in the GCC, while their family lived in

Syria. Once the conflict began, it became difficult for them to visit their family because, if they entered Syria, they risked not being able to leave again or being conscripted into the army. Thus, they had to remain in the neighbouring country. Some men tried to bring their families from Syria to live with them. However, high cost, residency issues and closed borders made it challenging for people to reunite with their family members in a neighbouring country. When they were unable to follow their family, people fled to Jordan. Many respondents discussed how they had not been able to see their family members because the family members were unable to visit Jordan. Similarly, they could not leave Jordan to visit their family because they would not be allowed to re-enter. For some, this meant not having seen their family in years. A respondent discussed how she was separated from her husband who was working in the United Arab Emirates prior to the conflict:

> When I left the country there was no other way. My husband stopped visiting us. I didn't see him for two years and six months. He knew that if he came to Syria, he might not be able to get out. He was afraid of coming here. He told me to go to Lebanon or Jordan, but he can't visit Syria. At first, I refused, my daughters are young and the trip was hard and people get injured, as there are troubles on the road. I didn't want to leave. We stayed having this discussion for two and a half years. Until one day we were sitting and we were bombed. 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).

Another woman explained how one of her sons worked in Lebanon, but the rest of the family was unable to follow him:

> My youngest son, the one in Lebanon now, was in the clear with his army booklet. He went to Lebanon and I told him to not come back anymore. Stay in Lebanon . . .. We were already heading to Jordan and there was no way for us to bring him to Jordan or for us to go to Lebanon. My two sons were with me, and they couldn't find a way to Lebanon because there wasn't any smuggling to Lebanon. But to Jordan, there was migrant smuggling. But it was impossible to smuggle migrants to Lebanon. For that reason, I told him that we're going to Jordan and depending on the circumstances, he can maybe find a way to join us here. If it didn't happen then it is what it is. It never happened. Six years have passed, without him being able to join us (Female-only head of household).

Factors that Perpetuate Separation

While there are distinct periods when family separation occurs, there are many factors that sustain separation and prevent Syrian refugees in Jordan from being reunited with their family. The processes of immigration and reunification are unclear and lengthy. It is difficult to get accurate information on the procedures and they vary for each country. One respondent, whose husband lived in

Germany, described the confusion and frustration of navigating the reunification process:

> He says, 'If we can do this with money, I can manage it or borrow.' We can even beg for money. The most important thing is to go. It is better than the family being separated. It does not work. Many people told me to apply and leave. Where can I go? Just tell me where I can go. If there is an office, tell me and I will go. But there is none. They asked me to go and register at the embassy, but if I go there, I will be lost (Female-only head of household).

Additionally, getting the appropriate identification and documentation is expensive and time-consuming. Some respondents explained that they do not have access to the paperwork that they would need to apply for immigration or reunification because it is still in Syria or was confiscated by the Syrian military. Another respondent discussed how her brother took his immediate family to Egypt, but she was unable to go because she and her children did not have access to passports:

> Yes, he took his wife and kids. He would have loved to take my mother, brother and sister. My mother said she cannot leave me behind. My children and I need passports. We need their uncle's signature for my children's passports. I cannot go to get the passports, the men do. I mean, you know this (Female-only head of household).

The majority of respondents said that cost is a substantial barrier to reunification with their family. The costs accumulate quickly. There are expenses tied to applying for residency and reunification as well as the journey itself. If a person has to use smuggling or bribery, that increases the price of the journey. These costs are additive to everyday living costs for a population that has few legal sources of income (Care International 2018). Because of this, many respondents cannot afford to be reunited with their families. One woman explained that it was not financially possible for her to apply for reunification:

> 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).

Even when respondents have the correct documentation and enough funds to apply for residency or reunification, this does not guarantee that their application will be approved. Respondents discussed going through the arduous application process only to be denied without an explanation. One woman described the stress of not knowing the status of her application:

> 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 ____ every month, but in vain (Dual head of household).

Another man explained his experience applying to bring his father and stepmother to Jordan from Syria:

> Yes, we tried to bring him here, they told us we had to send an application to the Ministry of Interior, and this application would be either approved or declined. I applied 13 times; they all were rejected. There has to be a 20-day period between each application. I used to wait for the 20 days to be over to apply again, I applied 12 or 13 times, but they all got rejected. So, they didn't come . . . I haven't seen my father for four years now—three years and a half actually (Male-only head of household).

One man is living in Jordan while his wife and children are in Saudi Arabia. His wife has residency there but he does not. Unable to return to Syria, he migrated to Jordan and has not seen his family in 4 years. He lamented:

> Until now, I cannot find the solution for me or my family. The same rules apply everywhere. It is the same in Turkey and Jordan too. I mean, wherever I go, I cannot enter Lebanon because I am Syrian. I cannot enter Turkey because I am Syrian. I cannot leave Jordan or go back to it because I am Syrian (Male-only head of household).

Discussion

This study examines the causes of family separation among Syrian refugees living in Jordan. The study's definition of family included both 'nuclear' and 'extended' family, creating space for participants to share their separation experiences with all meaningful family in their lives. We found critical moments of separation that occur during migration—before, during and after flights from Syria. At the point of the crisis, Syrian families encountered a multitude of factors, often forcing them to flee in different directions. Different priorities resulted in a range of decisions and determined whether a person stayed in Syria or left—and where they journeyed to. Once they had reached Jordan, we found that many family members chose to leave family a second time to improve their circumstances. This could be for a number of reasons, including finding work, education opportunities for their children or to be reunited with family in another country. Some family members chose to return to Syria to be with loved ones or take dangerous journeys to Europe to create better pathways. For families living separately prior to the conflict, the degree of separation was exacerbated when the conflict began. Tight migration policies have kept families in different countries, sometimes for years.

A strong body of literature shows that family separation has many negative impacts on the wellbeing of the members of a family (Wilmsen 2016; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2017; Beaton *et al.* 2018; McNatt and Boothby 2018; Löbel 2020). With 36.5 percent of Syrian refugees registered in Jordan and living separately from a family member, this has severe implications (UNHCR 2017b). Family separation among Syrian refugees living in Jordan has led to broken social networks, which has adverse psychosocial consequences (McNatt and Boothby 2018; Löbel 2020) and is associated with poor mental and physical health outcomes (Cécile *et al.* 2001; Nickerson *et al.* 2011; Thoits 2011). Additionally, the separation of families led to increased financial burdens and more children leaving school to procure work in other countries, including Syria, which also caused changes in familial roles, resulting in parenting challenges (McNatt and Boothby 2018). Furthermore, family separation among refugees has been found to be significantly related to variance in post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression/anxiety symptoms and psychological quality of life (Miller *et al.* 2018). Additional research has revealed that it is more difficult for refugees to settle and integrate into their host country when their family is not unified (Wilmsen 2013; Löbel 2020).

For many Syrians living in Jordan, the durable solution is being reunified with their families and refugees want to migrate to wherever reunification is possible (McNatt and Boothby 2018). This study identified several challenges experienced by Syrian refugees in Jordan: (1) the processes of immigration and reunification are unclear and lengthy; (2) attaining the appropriate identification and documentation is expensive and time-consuming; some refugees are missing needed paperwork because it is still in Syria or was confiscated by the Syrian military, and they are therefore unable to migrate; (3) the journey to Jordan or a third country is costly; (4) even when applicants have the correct documentation and enough funds to apply for residency or reunification, that does not guarantee that their application will be approved.

For many, especially for the most vulnerable, family reunion is often the only way to ensure a durable solution. Indeed, the lack of access to family reunion has left Syrian women, children and men in Jordan facing a stark choice: stay separated from family members in precarious living conditions where basic needs go unmet or embark on perilous, unsafe journeys to reach loved ones in other countries. Many of these families have already had to make impossible decisions about whether to leave family members behind in Syria, be it an elderly parent or a son who has been forcibly recruited to the military. The constant fear and anxiety about the wellbeing of these and other separated family members can be devastating and prevents refugees from rebuilding their lives as well as undermines prospects of durable solutions. If the aim of responding to refugee crises is not only to save lives, but also to help families thrive and create stable futures, then family reunification must be considered an essential component of durable solutions and obstacles preventing reunification must be urgently addressed.

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